



A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 1

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch01

July, Gui Le territory.

The sun blazed high in the sky, so fierce that the trees on both sides of the road seemed to have bowed down in shame.

Four or five travellers, who could no longer stand the scorching heat, were huddled under the shade of the tree, desperately trying to cool themselves. Because of this, the old man with a small tea booth by the unpaved road had a few more customers than usual.

“A cup of tea.” A traveller carefully took out his wallet and fished out a few coins, placing it on the table, while fanning himself vigorously.

“Here, a cup of tea for you to soothe your liver and cool the heat.” The old man brought the tea and smiled at him. “It’s a hot day. Where are you headed to, Mister?”

“Yes, this demon of a day is indeed hot enough to toast one to death.” Just one sip of tea seemed to appease his dry, depleted throat. He seemed slightly happier and said, “I’m just hurrying to deliver stock to the border. Sigh, ever since Dong Lin started messing with the border, it’s been hard for us traders to earn a living. Luckily the Marquess of Jing-An is pushing that Bei-What’s-His-Name away. Otherwise, I would’ve never known when to go there.”

“Yeah, the Marquess of Jing-An is amazing!”

“I know who you’re talking about, he’s the brother of the King of Dong Lin. He’s strong too.”

The nearby people laughed. “Who cares about strength? He still got forced

back home when he opposed the Marquess of Jing-An, eh?” He drained the remaining content of his cup and placed a few more coins on the table. “Another cup please, Sir!”

Hearing that, the tea seller nodded. “I heard that he’s never lost a battle – totally worth his title of being Gui Le’s strongest commander.”

Suddenly a voice interrupted, “You dare mention the Marquess of Jing-An? He’s currently labelled as the traitor of Gui Le.”

This struck the tea drinkers crowd like lightning. Their mouths dazedly dropped open.

The tea seller broke the silence. “What are you saying? The Marquess of Jing-An...”

“Do all of you not know?” The newcomer sat down and used his sleeves to fan himself. “I just came out of the city yesterday. Apparently he attempted to assassinate the King and has now escaped out of the capital city. At the moment, the King has commanded everyone to capture him. I heard that the reward is pretty good too.”

“But didn’t he just stabilise the borderline situation and was returning to the capital to collect his rewards?”

“Heh, isn’t it strange. On the very night he was returning to the capital, he tried to assassinate the King. Guess what weapon he used?” The newcomer was dramatising the news, as most of them had their attention on him.

“Must be a precious sword,” someone guessed.

“Don’t listen to this nonsense,” others argued, “There’s no way I’d believe that the Marquess of Jing-An would betray us. He’s Gui Le’s most loyal official, there’s no way he’d break the law.”

The newcomer saw the others’ suspicious looks and stroke his beard. “He used the Precious Heimo Sword, which was personally bestowed to him by the King. And you know, any damage inflicted by that precious sword, no matter how small, will leave a nasty black scar which will never fade.”

“But...”

In the midst of their debating, they suddenly heard hooves approaching.

A carriage, probably an ordinary merchant's, had arrived; its curtains tightly drawn. The driver was a man with huge muscles. He threw down two coins, yelling, "Ye old man! Gimme some tea!"

"Coming!"

"This damn day is too hot!"

"That's right, that's right. Feel free to cool down under the tree before going on your way. We're discussing about the Marquess of Jing-An."

"Tch. I'm only interested in business, not some royalty or political creep." He gulped down the rest of his cup noisily and brought out a huge water container. "Fill that up, I gotta go now."

The seller hurriedly filled the water container.

The man grabbed the container, got on the horse which neighed once, before moving forward.

Inside the horse carriage, Pingting finally opened her eyes, against the endless bumps of the unpaved road.

It was a humid day and sweat was dripping down her neck. Her eyes were narrowed, as they tried to adjust to the light.

Her head was really sore and pangs of dizziness rose, like waves threatening to consume her.

Where am I? Pingting looked at herself absentmindedly, then around her, and seemed to be fully awoken now.

The memory of a scene, full of fire and cries of battle and fighting returned to her.

"Pingting, wait outside the city. We'll go in to save Father."

"Then...Master, we'll meet again on the cliff at dawn."

Where was the Duke? Master? And what about that mischievous, always-causing-trouble, Dongzhuo?

She remembered that after making the promise, she had set out for the cliff. In

her most recent memory, she was definitely already at the cliff. And all of sudden, the back of her head throbbed painfully once before her eyes fade to black...

“You awake?” The curtains were pushed aside, revealing a peering man’s face, “You should’a woken ages ago. Any longer, and Zhang Boy would’a beaten ya to death.”

Are these people human trafficking troupe? Pingting studied them carefully.

Could it be that I’ve been caught by human traffickers when Master needs me the most? The number of times Pingting had left the Residence alone throughout her life was scarce and during this exact moment where she was urgently needed, she JUST had to be caught by the human traffickers.

“Okay, I’m gonna ask ya somethin’.” The man sat inside the carriage and took out the gag in Pingting’s mouth. They must have had placed it in her mouth to stop her from screaming for help in case she woke up along the journey. He gave her an intimidating glare, “If you dun’ tell meh the truth, I’ll feed ya to the wolves.”

Pingting nearly laughed at this child-like threat. Why would she be scared? She’d been serving the Marquess of Jing-An, He Xia, since small and she was the only woman who could follow him on his outings. Although she was young, she’d already seen a lot of battles.

Pingting didn’t wait for the man to ask his question, asking one of her own instead. “Did you capture me in the city?”

The man looked surprised at her relaxed expression and chuckled, not angrily. “Yeah.”

“How long did I sleep for?”

“Two days and a half.”

Pingting went pale when she heard this, stunned in shock.

If she had been sleeping for the last two days, then the king’s soldiers would have begun searching around the capital, making it very difficult for her Master and the others to stay at the agreed place, near the cliffs. Her heart sped up as

she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"To the..." the man suddenly stopped, realising something was wrong. "Eh? Yer know I'm the one askin' questions ere, right?" He gave her a ferocious expression. "Say, which rich family have you escaped from, runaway wife? Where's your home?"

Runaway wife?

Pingting hesitated, lowering her head and studied herself.

Although she was only a servant of her residence, her Master had always cherished her and so she'd gotten things that were even more expensive than the ladies of normal households. Her clothes looked expensive and she had been riding away from the city at an odd hour so the trafficker had naturally thought that she had run away from her husband.

No wonder the trafficker hadn't thrown her out in the last two days, he had probably seen some value in her.

Pingting shook her head and laughed, "I'm just a maid, not a runaway wife from a wealthy family."

"Tch, since when did servants get silk clothes?"

Pingting debated over what to say in her head carefully. It was highly likely that the King had already ordered all citizens to hunt for the people of Jing-An Ducal Residence, so she decided not to give away her real identity. So instead, she rolled her eyes and said, "I escaped out of the city to see my lover, but because I wanted to look pretty, I stole some of My Lady's clothes." Gui Le was a somewhat noisy place and therefore a lot of women really would sneak out to see their lovers.

The man frowned immediately at this and threw open the curtains, "Zhang Boy! Com'over here!"

"Coming." There seemed to be more than one trafficker, on the other carriage.

Not long after, a chubby face peered in from the window. "Fu Erge, wassup?"

So his name was Fu Erge.

"Wassup yer head! Didn't ya say this girl was a runaway wife from a rich family

and could be swapped for a lot of money?” Fu Erge glared at Pingting and jabbed an accusing finger at her, “She’s just a servant, dammit! And she slept for two days!”

Zhang Boy scratched his head and studied Pingting carefully. Then he laughed, “Fu Erge, don’t be angry. What’s done is done. She’ll probably have some value anyway.”

“Oh, so ya can sell off this rubbish?” sneered the man, jabbing an accusing finger at Pingting’s nose.

True, Pingting’s appearance certainly wasn’t at all pretty. Even in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, her looks at most, had been average, probably even more common. One could only say that she was “tidy”.

But everyone in the Jing-An Ducal Residence recognised how important she was.

However, as the stranger jabbed a finger at her and claimed she was worthless, she couldn’t help rolling her eyes.

Fu Erge coughed two times and faked a depressed tone. “Ne’er mind, she should be at least worth around fifty coins. This robbing bitch really gave me false hope; I even let her stay in my private carriage for two ‘ole days. Dammit, take her to the other carriage with the others.”

The moment she entered the other carriage, a terrible odour flooded her senses and Pingting realised why Fu Erge had been so angry.

In comparison to the first carriage, this one was tattered and crowded, dirty and sweltering hot.

There were seven or eight girls already crammed inside. Their hands had also been tied behind their back like Pingting and they were gagged, with fear evident in their eyes. All eyes landed sympathetically on Pingting, as she was now a new addition to these cluster of unfortunate girls.

“Move over! Here’s another one.” Zhang Boy pushed Pingting inside and began to ungag the girls, “At the moment, we’re in the wilderness, so I’ll let you talk. Some of you are bound to die in this heat anyway. Be good and stay put, okay!” After saying this, he ran off, probably to drive the carriage or something.

Pingting stumbled from Zhang Boy's push and sat down in a corner with much difficulty.

"Cough, cough...cough..." The carriage was shaking so hard and her throat felt very sore, so she'd coughed a few more times along the journey.

Suddenly, unease rippled in her.

Have I not recovered from that time I went with Master to the doctors?

Pingting frowned, closing her eyes and leaning her head against the wall of the carriage.

As she felt a bit more comfortable, she couldn't help worrying.

Jing-An Ducal Residence, the place she'd been living all her life, was probably reduced to ashes right?

Prince Su, no, he was now the new king. The King's hatred of the military-rich House of Jing-An grew day by day. Recently her Master had triumphed in the war and the King had finally decided to take him down, framing her Master for rebellion on the day of his return.

Luckily the House of Jing-An had been wary, so the damage was not too great.

Her Master should have already found a good escape route by now.

Not that she would know where they'd hide but that was okay, as they'd be safe in a place where no one could guess. Their pursuers won't know where to look and therefore will never find them.

Sound suddenly erupted, as most girls were crying over their misfortune. Pingting opened her eyes and looked around slowly.

Yep, they're all really pretty. I should be the ugliest one here, right?

Human traffickers were always after pretty girls. They could be sold off as a concubine for a high price. Pingting thought of Fu Erge, and how he estimated her value of fifty coins and chuckled. It was definitely easy enough to drown him with the amount of money her Master gave her every week.

Who knew what expression Fu Erge would make if he knew who she was.

"Um Sis..." A girl beside Pingting touched her shoulder shyly, "Did you get

captured by them too?”

She was really cute, no wonder she'd been caught by the human traffickers. She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Aren't you scared?”

“No.”

The little girl looked at her in surprise. “You're not scared?”

Pingting saw that she was probably going to say something else, so she began first. “What's your name?”

“My...name's Qing. What's yours?”

“I'm Hong.” She automatically lied about her name. She definitely wouldn't use such a fancy name like ‘Bai Pingting’ but it wouldn't do to have no name at all.

“Okay Sis, then...”

“Do you know where we're going?” She interrupted Qing again, taking advantage of her situation. She wasn't scared, just a little excited. It was a bit like accompanying her Master, figuring out the enemy's motive from the different clues. Except this time, she was fighting alone.

“According to that fat guy and mean guy, we would be sold in Dong Lin.”

In the enemy's country? Pingting's eyebrows creased even more.

Her Master's last battle at the border was against the troops of Dong Lin. Pingting had the Dong Lin army purposely being directed into the mountains and then by controlling the river flow, the enemy were forced to full retreat in the threat of a flood. Back then, her Master had said, “Now the whole army knows that we have a female military advisor. When we get back, I'll get Father to reward you. What would you like this time?”

If she was recognised in Dong Lin, the consequences would be...

It seemed that using the human trafficker's carriage to escape the King's wrath was impossible. She'd need to find a good time to escape, leave their carriage and then find her Master by herself.

In the midst of her thinking, her body suddenly heaved forward. Pingting felt her energy draining away as she began to cough again.

“Cough, cough...”

“Sis...” Qing looked at her worriedly.

“I’m fine.” She had finally stopped but she was left with a foul, blood-like taste in her mouth. Pingting suddenly froze, did she just cough up blood again?

First things first, how could she escape?

She wasn’t unhealthy, but her illness was slowly eating away at her. She hadn’t told her Master back in the battlefield, because she didn’t want to worry him. And then that incident happened the night they went back.

Her thoughts were still a mess, no wonder her illness had gotten worse.

Pingting thought for a little longer and sighed, “Fine, Dong Lin it is.” She had decided to go to Dong Lin with the human traffickers.

After all, the command to capture the one thousand members of the Jing-An Ducal Residence was only valid on Gui Le territory.

The enemy’s country wasn’t a bad option — as long as her identity remained a secret.

A couple of days later, the carriage had arrived in Dong Lin.

But the human traffickers were not stupid to sell the girls at the poor villages on the outskirts of Dong Lin, so they continued to travel for a couple of days. When they arrived at capital of Dong Lin, Moen, they forced the girls off the carriage, have them cleaned at an inn and gave them fresh clothes to wear.

Despite the war, trades of women from the other countries weren’t unusual. There seemed to be a section for human traffickers in almost every major city’s trading markets. Each of them was pushed on to a stage, one by one, and auctioned.

Pingting was the most unpopular and was placed towards the end of the line. The silk clothes she had originally been wearing had been given to Qing, who was labelled for a high price.

“Beauties from Gui Le! Hey, beautiful women from Gui Le!”

Pingting thought of how she was the most important maid at Gui Le’s Jing-An Ducal Residence and how she was being sold like a complete nobody now. She shook her head and laughed bitterly.

No wonder people always say that life changes so quickly.

She stood on stage and studied her fellow girls, most of them now sold. The one who bought Qing was a painter and he looked very kind, very rich. Qing was quite noisy, yelling “Sis! Sis!” refusing to let go of Pingting’s hand.

But Pingting knew that Qing, who came from a poor family, was actually very lucky to be sold into a nice family. Even her, if she hadn’t been saved by her Master back then, she would’ve died of hunger long ago on the streets.

“Go, don’t be scared.” Pingting patted her hand, eyes following her as she left.

She was the last one to be sold.

Being ugly really put her at a disadvantage this time. The human traffickers tried to persuade the audience and finally sold her off to a housekeeper looking for an under servant, for forty cents.

If her Master knew that she’d been sold for forty cents, he would have died laughing.

She was then brought over to the well-decorated front door of a huge residence. “This is the main entrance, got that? You under servants should be using the side door though.” The housekeeper pointed at a sign overhead.

Pingting looked up and read the big characters on the sign, “Hua Residence”.

Luckily it wasn’t the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, or she would’ve tried to run.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie, was the famous younger brother of Dong Lin’s king. He was the best military commander of Dong Lin — and one of the people who’d retreated in the last battle.

“Yeah, not bad, at least you can read.” The Missus Hua nodded while taking Pingting to the so-called side door. “From now on, this is your new home. Master and his daughter are both very kind so if you do your work properly, you’ll be treated very well.”

Just like that, Hua Residence gained another normal maid.

Pingting's main role was laundry work. It was shocking to her that there'd be a day where she needed to wash so many clothes.

Back in Jing-An Ducal Residence, although her rank was a maid, she was like her Master's younger sister. She never did anything more than bringing tea or accompanying her Master while painting or play the qin. As for her own clothes, she had always given them to her maids to wash.

"Finally done." She took the painfully cleaned clothes and hung them up in the patio to dry. Pingting muttered, "Geez Pingting, don't you know that you shouldn't slack off with your daily duties? Now do you know what being a maid really means, right? This isn't the first time you've slacked off." She smiled, showing two dimples.

Her black eyes shone, revealing a hidden radiance that overwhelmed her surroundings. Although her looks were fairly plain, her expression had a sort of graceful youth about it.

If Fu Erge had seen Pingting just then, he'd totally regret selling her off for only forty cents.

The people of Hua Residence were kind to their workers. Mrs Hua noticed that Pingting coughed a lot and even bought her some medicine. Though it didn't exactly work, she did feel a little better after drinking some.

Pingting secretly waited for her recovery, but one small incident, ruined all her plans to escape.

Translation Notes:

- Coins: Money. In the actual novel, the type of money (dollars, cents) is unknown.
- Residence: In a residence, there are many buildings, therefore the word "house" cannot correctly portray the place. These buildings are typically enclosed by a large wall of some kind and there is usually a large main entrance into it. There are also some side doors that lower-ranked servants may use. Unfortunately these buildings are typically (though

there are exceptions) one large room, separated by doorways (but no doors usually) and possibly curtains. In other words, it means that sometimes “room” implies the entire building.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 2

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The weather was relatively good, the sun was hidden behind the clouds and it wasn't as hot as the last two days.

Pingting had already finished washing the assigned clothes and was wiping the sweat from her face when Mother Chen approached her.

"Hong, are you busy?"

"I've just finished washing. What do you need, Mother Chen? I've done yesterday's washing too, except I still need to fold them..."

"Don't worry about that." Mother Chen followed Pingting to the washing line and chuckled, "You can put that down for now, I need to talk to you."

Pingting put down the bucket of washing, "Yes?"

"You fixed the two holes in my clothes, didn't you?"

"I saw them so I did do the mending. Is it no good?"

Mother Chen gave another chuckle, "It's not 'no good'. I could hardly tell that there was a hole there! I never guessed you had such nimble fingers!" She grabbed Pingting's hand, studied it and asked, "Why didn't you tell us about your skill? I'll tell you this, My Lady's wedding is coming up and we're in a rush to prepare the clothes. Only three girls in our entire Residence are proficient with needlework, so I'm worried we won't finish in time. From today on, you don't need to do manual work anymore, come and help sew!" She was Lady Hua's nurse, so she was extremely excited when it came to her wedding.

"This is..." These days, her health had greatly improved and she was planning to escape soon. It would've been a lot easier to escape if she was still a laundry

maid.

“This is what? Do you still want to do manual labour?” Mother Chen patted Pingting’s hand, “It’s a great opportunity. I’ll tell the housekeeper about this. Inside you go and don’t worry about anything else for now.” She bounced away happily, before Pingting could answer.

Pingting had no choice but to pack her things up and go inside.

The Hua family was one of the most famous commercial families of Dong Lin. The head of the family had one daughter and so her wedding was extremely important. Her clothes required at least four seamstresses and now they had a new addition.

As a seamstress, Pingting’s food and clothing had greatly improved from the time when she was still a manual labourer. However, Pingting had been spoiled for a long time in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, so she took no notice in the changes. Though her lifestyle had very much downgraded, she was flexible and therefore she didn’t complain.

For unknown reasons, the seamstresses had been scheduled near Lady Hua’s building.

“What beautiful fabric, I wish I could wear something like this when I marry. I can’t imagine how beautiful I’ll be!” The seamstresses sat inside, in their own corner. Their heads were bent over while their needles weaved across the fabric.

“Don’t be stupid, how lucky can you get?”

Ruo’er, the girl who spoke first, had been promoted to a seamstress at the same time as Pingting. Seeing how Zihua was mocking her, she retorted, “How can you be so sure about that?”

“Okay, okay, hurry up and get back to work.” Mother Chen was in the room too and seeing how Pingting was so absorbed in her work, she couldn’t resist tiptoeing over to see what she was doing. “Wow! That’s amazing needlework!”

Pingting jumped back in surprise, momentarily losing control of her needle, pricking herself.

“Hong, your hands really are amazing.” Mother Hong took Pingting’s sewing

and studied the lively, realistic phoenix. She had worked in the Hua Residence for many years yet this was the first time something had sparked her interest. Suddenly, she had a thought. “This technique...I doubt you could find two with the same capabilities in Dong Lin. Yeah, I think your phoenix’s wings is not typically like Dong Lin’s traditions, I think it’s more like...”

Pingting’s heart thumped and she laughed nervously while taking back her stitching. “I don’t exactly understand, but it just has to look good right?”

Her sewing in Gui Le was considered spectacular as well. Although the Jing-An Ducal Residence didn’t particularly announce it, there had been some private requests for her needlework.

Pingting was also a lazy person, so she refused to sew any more except for a few objects for her Master. This meant that there weren’t many traces of her sewing in the Jing-An Ducal Residence left around.

While Mother Chen wasn’t looking, she unpicked the wings of her phoenix. She was just about to rest her eyes when a beautiful girl entered the room. Her body was slender, she had huge pondering eyes and her nose was a perfect bridge. She wore an embroidered light purple dress and a necklace of pearls glittered around her neck.

Mother Chen hurried stood up and asked, “Why are you here, My Lady?”

So she was Lady Hua. Pingting had been outside doing manual labour, so this was the first time she had actually seen the Lady. All of the maids stood up.

“Oh Nurse, you’re here too?”

“Of course, these are My Lady’s wedding clothes after all, shouldn’t I be seeing everything thoroughly? Look at this sequin, I took a long time picking it out from...”

Lady Hua seemed to have lost interest in Mother Chen’s word. She glanced at the red fabric and annoyance crossed her eyes. She turned towards the maids and eyed them, as if searching for someone.

She carefully measured everyone with her eyes, finally letting her eyes rest on Pingting.

“You, come with me.” Lady Hua pointed at Pingting and walked away, not waiting for an answer.

“Me?” Pingting pointed to herself in surprise and looked at Mother Chen.

“My Lady told you to go, so what are you standing there for? Go.” Mother Chen lightly pushed her shoulder.

What does Lady Hua need me for? Don't tell me...she knows my real identity?

Pingting followed her into the main room of the Lady's building and a nice fragrance in the air made her relax. Pingting took a deep breath, thinking, *Sir Hua is really nice to his daughter. This sort of iced fragrance is a luxury that only royalty can afford.*

Lady Hua gestured to Pingting to come into the room, “Come here”.

Pingting followed and Lady Hua threw her some clothes, commanding, “Put these on.”

The clothes were very fine, a display of exquisite workmanship. It was obvious that these were the Lady's very own clothes.

She saw the confusion on Pingting's face, clicked her tongue and smiled. “You see, your figure resembled mine most. Geez, I wasn't planning to look for a replacement but Dong'er just had to get sick.”

“Perfect!” Lady helped Pingting into the clothes and made her turn around. She looked really happy when she said, “your body shape is exactly the same as mine. You'll be thought of as a beauty, so long no one sees your face.” Lady was naively romantic in a way that she actually believed her words held no ill intentions.

Pingting giggled nervously, not knowing what to do.

“What's your name?”

“Hong.”

“Hong, I need a favour.” Lady Hua took a deep breath and whispered, “If you successfully pretend to be me, I'll greatly award you. If you mess up...let's just say I'll punish you like hell. Also, don't you dare tell anyone about this! If anyone else learns of it, I'll get Mrs Hua to whip you!” Her words were threatening but

there was no force in her tone.

Pingting didn't know whether to laugh or not. "My Lady, I promise not to tell anyone. I'll do what My Lady asks."

"Hmm, that's good. Don't be scared, I'm not a violent person actually." Lady Hua paused before saying, "I need you to go with me outside the city and we will be going to a shrine on a hill. When we get there, I need you to put on my clothes and play the qin, without a fuss. Oh yeah, I forgot, can you play qin?" She had only just remembered such an important detail.

Pingting saw Lady Hua look at her anxiously and couldn't help nodding, "A little..."

"That's fine." Lady Hua repeated the task again, finally adding, "Don't worry. If anything goes wrong, there's still me." She patted her chest and fluttered her eyelashes. She looked really cute.

Pingting knew immediately that she was going to see her lover. She felt sorry for her fiancé, who was going to marry such a bold and reckless girl.

The carriage had been prepared by afternoon. The housekeeper was already waiting outside. Though her father loved her dearly, she was still the Lady of a big family, so she didn't get many chances to leave the Residence. This meant the times she could see her lover were limited, and therefore she was very excited and nervous right now.

"Hong will accompany me on the carriage," Lady declared when they came out. Lady Hua led Pingting inside the carriage. Lady Hua's requests were usually unusual due to her spoiled nature so her bringing in a seamstress did not surprise the other people at all.

Pingting was wearing her usual clothes and the clothes she was going to change into were placed in a bag. This outing reminded her of the ones she went with her Master. Seeing how Lady Hua was so cute and naive, her energy came back and she was eager to help wholeheartedly.

Luckily the carriage was quite big, so the two girls had plenty of room.

"I've never seen you before."

Pingting touched her hair, “I used to be outside washing clothes. How was Lady supposed to see me?”

“Washing clothes? That’s tiring.” Lady Hua wriggled in her spot. She put a piece of Osmanthus cake in her mouth and held up another piece. “Want some?”

Pingting liked sweets too. Her master always commanded to save some for Pingting, whenever they had nice sweets. Even today, she couldn’t help nodding at the sight of Osmanthus cake, “Yes, please.”

Lady Hua laughed and placed some in Pingting’s mouth.

The moment the cake entered her mouth, the faint fragrance of Osmanthus played at the tip of her tongue. Pingting had been treated as a normal maid for exactly two months and her face was absolutely delighted when she ate this delicacy. “It’s really good.”

As the two people talked, they gradually began to warm up to each other.

Soon, the carriage had left the city gates.

The carriage was put down and Mrs Hua respectfully beckoned, “My Lady, we’ve arrived.”

Lady Hua answered back and led Pingting outside. A monk, who’d been waiting, welcomed Lady Hua inside. It looked like the Hua family were regular visitors.

The housekeeper and the footmen were not allowed to go inside – only Pingting and Lady Hua were allowed to do so. They locked the door behind them.

“Mrs Hua occasionally looks through the window, so put on my clothes, sit there and play the qin.” The Lady glowered, “Remember, don’t pause for too long. If they can’t hear the qin, the monks and Mrs Hua might get suspicious and come in to check on you.”

She said this while hurriedly putting on her pre-prepared scholar clothes. She wiped the makeup off her face, instantly transforming into a handsome man. She gave her original clothes to Pingting and winked. She was very fast so she must’ve done the same thing before.

“I’m going. I’ll be back when the time’s right.” She went to a corner and somehow opened a secret passage, adding smugly, “Only him and I know about this door, no one else.”

Pingting had also seen secret passageways in Jing-An Ducal Residence. It seemed that every big house would have some so she couldn’t help smiling and shaking her head, while Lady Hua’s eager figure disappeared.

She sat where she was asked to, hands lightly touching the qin.

The strings beneath Pingting’s five fingers had a welcoming touch.

She loved to play the qin. The faster the notes were, the more it resembles top-quality wine; which possesses the ability to intoxicate the drinker fully.

In Jing-An Ducal Residence, she was a legendary girl. Not many had personally seen her before, but everyone knew of her battle tactics, needlework and her spectacular qin skills...

Even the King knew that there was an all-rounded maid working for the Duke of Jing-An.

Zeng...

Pingting lightly plucked a single string, leaving the bass note hanging in the air like a bewitching appetiser before a grand feast.

Deep, not blunt. Light, yet highly melodic.

After the deep notes came a happy high pitched melody. It was like a graceful egrets flapping their mighty wings, soaring over a lush green forest at daybreak.

The corners of Pingting’s mouth twitched into a smile, as her fingers danced across the strings. The music continued to soar, leaving its listeners to sigh in pleasure.

She was already tired after a piece. Pingting reached for her handkerchief and wiped the sweat away from her face. She remembered what Lady Hua had told her and gave a bitter smile. *“She said that you must keep playing the qin, even until your hand breaks from the tiredness. That just shows how little she knows about qin.”*

Suddenly she heard a man’s voice outside the door.

"I have never heard such heavenly music in my entire life. May I see the divine face of the Lady who is able to play such music?" His voice sounded well-educated and made one feel relaxed.

This person must have been standing outside for a long time, waiting for me to finish this piece. He must be someone who knows a lot about music.

Pingting immediately felt slightly flustered because she had temporarily forgotten her orders. *"Geez Pingting, just what are you doing in the enemy's country? At the moment, the Lady is seeing her lover, so if this person comes in, our covers will be blown."*

She used her thumb to gently pluck a string. However, before she could refuse, that person suddenly cut in, "My Lady's qin sound is full of regret. As it seems that you do not wish to see me again, then I can only wait for a destined day."

Such a polite gentleman.

Pingting waited for a moment, carefully listened, and she slowly began to smile. Silence. She tiptoed to the window and peered out. No one was there.

"Has he already left?" A look of penitence flashed in her eyes as her pulse began to calm down.

While Pingting looked out the window, she saw that Mrs Hua was looking her way and hurriedly lowered her head.

By evening, Lady Hua had come back through the secret passage. Her face was flushed and she looked as if she had a really happy day. Lady Hua and Pingting swapped clothes and informed Mrs Hua that they could go back to the Residence.

In the carriage, Lady Hua chattered to Pingting about her lover in a lively manner. When she got to the happiest moments, she couldn't help covering her mouth and laughing merrily.

Pingting saw how happy she was and felt really happy for her.

"Sigh, the day passed too quickly." Then Lady Hua sighed again and said, "Wouldn't it be nice if I didn't have to marry?"

Pingting thought about how strange that was. "Sir really cares about My Lady,

so why did he engage you to the Chen family without consulting your feelings first?”

Lady Hua’s face darkened at the mention of marriage. “Daddy may love me, but this business is in competition with the Xu family. There’s no way he’d let me marry the son of the person he hates the most. Don’t tell this to Daddy or he’ll make me marry even earlier.”

“My Lady, your wedding is rapidly approaching. You won’t be able to hide it much longer.

“Yeah I know...” Lady Hua sighed and looked at Pingting. Suddenly she had another thought and grabbed Pingting’s hand, pleading, “If you don’t finish my wedding clothes, doesn’t that mean I don’t have to marry? It’s a good idea, just make a small hole in my wedding clothes every day and make Mother Chen and them work more, please?” She fluttered her eyelashes, clearly pleased with herself.

Pingting laughed and rolled her eyes at this childish idea. She was about to tell Lady Hua that that wouldn’t work when the carriage stopped.

A crowd of unknown men circled them and slowly closed in. There was about ten of them, and they were all on horses.

These men were wearing peasant clothes but their expression was far too educated, while their actions were too collected.

The sun was starting to set and the Hua carriage was still outside the city. There were no other travellers on the road. The footmen knew that if they were attacked by bandits, there was no way to defend themselves. The housekeeper finally plucked the courage, barely managing to stay at front of the carriage, her chubby face twitching as a young man, who seemed to be the boss, got off his horse. “Mister, my Lady is in this carriage. We were just returning from the shrine so we have donated most of our money. There’s not much left...”

The young man was carrying an air of importance and he saw how the housekeeper had stammered so badly. He laughed, “Missus, you have misunderstood me. I am here on behalf of my Master.” Turning to the carriage, he spoke again, “Please excuse my rudeness, My Lady, and accept this.”

Lady Hua wasn't sure what exactly was going on but she was very much amused, "What are you going to give me?"

"My Lady's qin technique was spectacular. Master has asked me to give this guqin to My Lady."

Pingting made a small sound of recognition and suddenly remembered the man who had wanted to see her. She leaned forward to whisper in Lady's ear.

"Who is your Master?" asked Lady Hua.

The man politely answered, "Please forgive me, My Lady. Master wishes to keep his name a secret for now. But Master did say that when the time is right, he will come to see you again." After saying this, he bowed again and carefully gave the guqin to the housekeeper. Then he got back on the horse and left.

The others saw him leave, and gradually followed suit.

The housekeeper saw that they had all left and immediately relaxed. She passed the guqin inside and chuckled, "That was surprising, hehe, My Lady must have been playing really well today to have attracted such a rich man. I thought Lady was playing well today too. It was mystifying!"

The Lady blinked at Pingting and whispered, "So you're good at the qin huh? I couldn't tell."

Pingting bent over and studied the guqin. The qin's body was made of old Paulownia wood and just by tapping it with mere finger left a sonorous sound.

Pingting suddenly paled. "Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin?"

Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin was extremely rare. It was something that even her Master's money couldn't buy. The previous owner of this item must be someone special, to give away such a precious item as a gift.

"A good qin for a beauty huh. I unwittingly picked up a talented girl. Interesting, very interesting." Lady Hua declared, looking really happy and she nudged Pingting, "That person said that he will come to see you, I'm sure he's interested in you." Gui Le and Dong Lin were rich cities and women had no difficulty in talking about love.

"Interested in me?" Pingting fingered the qin.

Her heart thumped and she wasn't sure what to do.

That person was indeed very sly, his actions were not too fast and not too slow. First quietly listening to the qin, then asking to meet, yet leaving without saying a word and then giving her an expensive qin. Everything was clearly calculated with different motives, just like the art of war.

Although they hadn't met yet, it was enough to spark Pingting's curiosity.

"Hong," the Lady nudged her and giggled, "look at you and your dazed look."

Pingting laughed sheepishly in response, but her eyes never leaving the guqin.

"Dong Lin isn't a playground, I have to stay alert."

Translation Notes:

- Qin: A traditional Chinese instrument. Do not confuse with "zheng". Sometimes there are "guqin" references. "Gu" means old/ancient, so "guqin" means "ancient qin". However, this is far too long to write in most cases, so it has been left untranslated.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 3

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch03

Ever since the visit to the shrine with Pingting, Lady Hua became very attached to Pingting and had an everlasting supply of subjects to talk about with her. She was closer to Pingting even more than the other girls who had been with her for the last few years. Coincidentally, Lady Hua's maid, Miss Dong'er was very sick and had to go back home so her parents could look after her. Lady Hua then requested Pingting to become her personal attendant.

Just like that, Pingting rose from a manual-work maid to a wedding seamstress to the Lady's Maid. She had skipped several stages, which surprised everyone.

September was just out of summer, but the autumn tiger was quite fierce.

The laughter of two girls was often heard behind the trees of the Lady's main room.

"Like this?"

"Nope."

"Then... is it like this?"

"Nope."

Lady Hua had tried to sew for the whole day, but she still didn't get it. She threw away her sewing and sighed dramatically. "I refuse to learn, it's no fun and my fingers are full of wounds."

Pingting laughed, "I already warned My Lady that sewing wasn't fun. When I first learned it, all ten of my fingers were swollen. My Lady's wounds are very

small anyway.” Pinging’s plan dictated that she was supposed to escape earlier, but since she hadn’t had any news of her Master, she decided to extend her stay.

That guqin was really good. Though Pingting liked it, she’d have to ask to use it, as it was displayed in Lady Hua’s room. After all, that qin was namely given to the Lady of Hua Residence.

“I wanted to sew something myself for him...” Lady Hua meant her secret lover.

“My Lady,” Mrs Hua seemed to be looking for her. Her face broke into a smile when she saw them and hurriedly smiled, “Oh, so My Lady was here, I had a difficult time finding you. Someone wants to see you.”

“Who wants to see me?”

“A handsome young man and the person who delivered you the qin is also there. He claims his name is Dong Dingnan.”

Pingting’s expression darkened. “*He really came.*”

“Bring him inside,” Lady Hua told the housekeeper before turning around and grabbed Pingting’s hands. Her eyes were bright when she said, “See? I guessed right, didn’t I? He really did want to see you.”

Pingting laughed, “He’s looking for My Lady, not me.”

Lady Hua answered back, “Geez, why are we still idling around? Come with me.”

She pulled Pingting into a guest house and sat down behind a blind. Soon the housekeeper led the guests inside

“My Lady, Mr Dong is here.”

“Okay. Mrs Hua, you may leave.”

Lady Hua and Pingting peeped at the man.

The housekeeper had left. There was only a young man left in the room. His clothes were expensive yet not flashy, the fabric being silk. His eyebrows were black and a graceful royal air surrounded him thus making him an extremely

handsome young man.

Lady Hua stared and then whispered into Pingting's ear. "Your qin skills must be really good, to have attracted such a good looking guy."

Pingting was just as shocked as Lady Hua, though her thoughts were different.

She had been in Jing-An Ducal Residence for many years so she knew immediately that he was not just an average rich man.

Could he be an official of Dong Lin?

No, could he even be a member of the royal family?

It wasn't entirely impossible to meet them, as this was Dong Lin's capital. His manners and the formal way he gave the qin was even more suspicious.

"I, Dong Dingnan, have selfishly come to see you, Lady." Dong Dingnan entered the room. When he saw the blinds, he knew immediately that she was quietly observing. He was extremely confident and laughed a little.

His family name wasn't actually 'Dong' and his name certainly wasn't 'Dingnan'. He was the current ruler of Dong Lin's very own brother, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie. He was often out on the battlefield and used to figuring out enemy plans. He had just been strolling around an outside of a shrine, feeling very bored when he heard a mystical qin music that soothed his heart.

Who would miss the opportunity to meet a beauty?

As the brother of the King of Dong Lin and as the most important duke, Duke of Zhen-Bei, he had planned everything meticulously. First wait and listen, ask to see at a later time, give a qin and research the Hua family before going to their Residence.

Lady Hua saw how Pingting stared at the man without a word and assumed that she is fond of the good looking gentleman behind the blinds separating them. Not quite knowing what to say, she rolled her eyes, "Since you already know how inconvenient this is, why you still came to see My Lady? My Lady doesn't usually see outsiders."

Pingting raised an eyebrow, but Lady Hua was clearly pleased with herself.

"The sound of qin was memorable and I have come here to ask for another

piece,” Chu Beijie replied breezily, giving a radiant smile.

Pingting began to analyse Dong Dingnan, but she could not recall a “Dong” family in Dong Lin. *This man is using a fake name, which is extremely suspicious. If he finds out who I am, I might get into a lot of trouble.* Seeing that Lady Hua was about to speak, she cut in, “Are you really here for a piece?”

“Yes.”

“So you gave me the expensive Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin just to hear me play it?”

“That’s right.”

Pingting put the qin in front of her and plucked a string.

A soft qin melody drifted from within the blinds; it was like a small stream running through a mountain of fresh spring grass. Spellbinding.

Even people outside were listening, breathing in perfect unison.

The melody started strong and powerful, gradually fading to a slow, gentle and sweet section, finally finishing with a high-pitched trill.

After playing one piece, Pingting said, “This qin’s sound indeed seems to fly in the wind, disappearing yet ever present. I’m guessing that Mister would like another piece?”

The so called Dong Dingnan smiled, “My Lady is very understanding, yes, I would like to hear another piece.”

“I have already returned your favour with the piece I just played.” Pingting’s voice was suddenly cold, “Playing the qin is fine with me but playing for someone who is using a fake name does not make me feel comfortable.”

Chu Beijie seemed to be a little stunned. “When did My Lady realise I was using a fake name?”

“Mister does not need to know when.” Pingting knew that her suspicions were right and a sly smile crossed her face. “Mister only needs to tell me whether I guessed right or not.”

Chu Beijie’s eyes brightened and stared intently into the blinds. He had heard

that the Lady of Hua Residence was a beauty with one-of-a-kind qin skills. It seemed that her skills lived up to her name, and it would be universally hard to find someone with similar skills. “My Lady is right. Dong Dingnan is one of my pseudonyms, though I didn’t imagine My Lady to see through that.”

“Why does Mister use a fake name?”

Chu Beijie thought that the girl in the blinds was very clever. Their conversation resembled the excitement of overthrowing an enemy, yet it was all hidden. Instead, he laughed and asked back, “Then why is Lady hiding behind the blinds?”

“Is my face that important?”

“Then are names that important?”

“How can Mister compare those two? You wanted a piece from me so I did you a favour. Of course you should use your real name.”

Chu Beijie sat by the table, sipping his cool tea, “Does My Lady not want anything?”

“Eh?” Pingting raised an eyebrow, “What do I want?”

“What My Lady wants is naturally music critic.” He simply laughed, his voice deep.

Pingting briefly thought that he was very difficult to guess, but had to admit that had a confident charm, which was enough to justify his arrogance.

Heart thumping loudly, she couldn’t help walking towards the curtain and secretly look closer.

Chu Beijie sat there proudly with a smug face that said ‘I know you’re secretly looking at me.’ Pingting noticed the decorative stitches of his clothes, finally letting her eyes fall on his jade pendant that hung from his waist.

Her slim figure was startled and she stiffened.

The jade pendant was shiny and smooth, obviously a top-quality product. What surprised her though was the Dong Lin royal family emblem.

He was someone of the Dong Lin royal family.

Pingting's eyes suddenly lit up. She had not heard any news about the Duke of Jing-An ever since coming to Dong Lin for several months. She believed that this was a good opportunity. Why not ask this 'Dong Dingnan'?

With that thought in mind, Pingting's dark black eyes were now full of cunningness.

"I see that Mister is a music critic, do you have an opinion after one piece?"

"My opinion?" Chu Beijie stared into the blinds, the corners of his mouth suddenly lifting into a smile. Bemused, he replied. "The piece was like a mystical swan flying through the clouds and like a strong eagle conquering the fields. This shows that My Lady is curious towards all aspects of life and does not care for riches. My Lady is like a man in more ways than one."

Pingting fell silent.

Chu Beijie was cleverer than she thought. He was able to tell her personality from one piece. Although she was fully aware of the potential danger he posed, she couldn't help but give him a look of admiration.

Pingting replied, "Mister is indeed right, but unlike a man I cannot do anything. For example, the world outside must be big and beautiful but I have not seen this myself."

This was on behalf of all women in the world, who were bound to their families and status. Even Lady Hua, who was still listening to their conversation, was nodding her head.

Pingting took a deep breath, "I heard that... apart from Dong Lin, there is a beautiful country called Gui Le. Don't they all love to sing?"

"That's right. Gui Le has many mountainous scenery, the people there like to dance and sing, but the most valuable thing in Gui Le is their copper. Gui Le makes more copper in one year than Dong Lin in three years." Chu Beijie brightened at the mention of Gui Le because that was one of his few interests. He had spent almost every day pondering over the map of Gui Le and without thinking, he had chattered away about it.

"No wonder they say that Gui Le is rich. Must be their bronze."

“Indeed, they are quite a rich country, but this has made them too relaxed. They are a weak country at the moment because the King and the nobility are always fighting internally.”

Chu Beijie summed up Gui Le’s problem in a couple of sentences.

Pingting sighed.

The House of Jing-An was at the core of Gui Le and since Pingting had grown up in their Residence, she knew more details about the court than the average peasant.

If the King hadn’t been jealous of the centuries-old House of Jing-An, then the Residence would’ve never been burnt overnight, right?

When Pingting heard Gui Le’s biggest problem from the ‘enemy’ in such a nonchalant tone, she couldn’t help asking, “So does Gui Le not have any form of monarchy or governors?”

“Well yes, Gui Le does have a duke, Duke of Jing-An. He has looked after the armies and governed the country for many years.” His smiled gently, revealing pleasure, “But because the House of Jing-An’s army was too big and successful, the new King decided to wipe it out.”

“What!” A rustling sound was heard from behind the blinds, “Didn’t you say the people of House of Jing-An were good? Then Gui Le’s King must be really weird.”

Chu Beijie sat up straighter, his expression much more determined. He laughed, “The House of Jing-An may be loyal to Gui Le, but he hates my Dong Lin. Now that they’re gone and Gui Le is without a strong leader, Dong Lin can easily conquer Gui Le.”

Pingting painfully registered the news, but feigned happiness, “I see, then our Dong Lin is even stronger. So... did no one from the Jing-An Ducal Residence survived?”

“There are some very cunning people in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, especially the young master, He Xia. I heard they weren’t there at the time of the fire. It is believed that they have escaped Gui Le. He Su is still trying to capture them, despite being on the ‘same side’. A real pity.” What he really meant by the last

two sentences was 'it was a real pity that He Su didn't finish off the House of Jing-An'.

She had finally learned that her Master had not been captured yet and she felt slightly relieved at this.

Her Master and the others were probably safe, right? Even if she tried, she didn't know where to begin looking for them. Why not stay here for a little longer, accompanying Lady Hua, and use him to find out the latest news?

Thinking that much, she plucked another string.

On the other side, Chu Beijie heard that note and the melody that followed. It was harmoniously broad, yet as smooth as trickling water. It was very much inspiring like the first except it was slightly more feminine.

Before one could sigh in pleasure, a somewhat deep voice began to accompany the qin sound.

"When there is trouble, there are heroes...When there are heroes, there are beautiful women...surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil..."

The mellow voice resonated, like an angel.

Chu Beijie was temporarily caught off guard by her voice and the theme of this song. His heart lifted at the sound of her music. Although he was only twenty years old, he had learned the art of war since he was little and excelled in all his studies. He grew up in the royal Residence, meaning that he'd seen many beautiful women in his lifetime and over time, admiration became disgust and contempt for them.

He vowed to find a real, real beauty.

The person behind the blinds, he knew, was definitely the best qin player he had ever heard. It was impossible to criticise. Though he had not seen her personally, he knew that she was beautiful from a portrait he had asked for during his initial investigation.

Looking at the figure's shape inside the blinds, he knew that it had to be her.

Each word filled the audience's heart and mind like jade beads clattering on a plate, while sometimes as quiet as a cup soundlessly being placed onto the table.

Pingting ended the piece by singing 'surviving the turmoil' several times and held the note there, letting it slowly die away.

Chu Beijie had closed his eyes to appreciate the music and he took a while to come back to his senses. "This 'Surviving the Turmoil' song is inspired by the pain and suffering of the 'beauty'. However, for you, there's a completely different feeling. It's more victorious, less suffering and pain."

"Thank you Mister." Pingting replied in a slightly deep voice and her face was flushed. Playing qin and singing was tiring work for her, but she still wanted to know more and had to keep his interest by appeasing his ear, "I've heard of He Xia from the House of Jing-An too. Don't they all say he's the best commander in Gui Le?"

"That is correct."

"Then...is our Duke of Dong Lin stronger than him?"

Chu Beijie smiled at the mention of himself, "What does My Lady think?"

"I've been inside for too long, how should I know? I have heard, from the newest servants, that He Xia fought Chu Beijie a while ago, at the borders of Gui Le."

"Yeah."

"Who won the battle?" Pingting knew that the victor had to be her Master, but she thought the victory had been too easy. Sure, she did lead them into a trap, but the troops of the Duke of Zhen-Bei were large enough to put up a good fight. However, they admitted defeat and retreated a bit too quickly.

When the Duke of Zhen-Bei returned to Dong Lin, was he punished for his defeat? If the King of Dong Lin ripped Chu Beijie of his authority, then he would've helped Gui Le immensely.

"He Xia won." Chu Beijie replied without any emotion.

"In other words, the Duke of Zhen-Bei lost?"

"No, the Duke of Zhen-Bei won too."

"Oh?"

Chu Beijie gave a dark, ambiguous smile, “He Xia small victory, Chu Beijie big victory.”

Most people wouldn’t understand, but this shocked Pingting deeply.

She knew this battle too well, Dong Lin had been invading the border for the last two years. At first, the King persisted in refusing to dispatch her Master there. It was only until the army there was about to admit defeat, when he’d hurriedly issued the transfer order, announcing that her Master must protect the border town at all costs.

The lack of medical supplies and food storage, in addition to the vigorous size of enemy army, had strongly threatened the military of her country.

But why did we win? She had thought of many scenarios to answer this question several times before, but Dong Dingnan had just confirmed her biggest fear.

“Why is My Lady so quiet?” His voice was deep.

Pingting pondered for a little longer, then sighed, “Humans can’t stop fighting, how annoying.”

Chu Beijie heard the annoyance in her voice, not quite understanding it, “My Lady, why bother with political affairs? Let’s talk about something more light-hearted.”

“True. Talking about nature would be a nicer topic.”

Pingting didn’t want to arouse his suspicions so she changed to literature and art. She was still worried that she might have accidentally given away her identity. She kept her answers short and always spoke curiously.

This was a good chance for Chu Beijie to show off, though he did try to keep a low profile, as he had travelled immensely in number before. But royal blood still ran his veins, so he veered off course. He began to talk about the shape of the place, then how to counterattack when attacked. He then explained when to openly attack, and when to plan assassinations. Even his comments about systems of government were well explained.

Hearing the silence inside the blinds, he tried to smile. “My discussions aren’t

interesting enough. I swapped back to war again.”

Pingting, inside the blinds, was thinking that this man had to be at least a warrior of the Dong Lin army. Suddenly, she had another thought, *could this guy be the Duke of Zhen-Bei himself?*

No way...how can there be such a coincidence? She shook her head several times to forget the thought. She whispered, “Thank you Mister. As you know, I am female, so I do not understand these things.”

The two people unwittingly talked the whole afternoon away.

Just before sunset, two knocks were heard outside the door, and the young man who had passed on the qin came in and whispered in Chu Beijie’s ear.

Pingting saw this and felt that they were talking about the war, possibly even about her Master himself. She tried to hear what they were saying, but she was too far away.

Chu Beijie sat up straighter, “Talking with My Lady and hearing My Lady play the qin was very pleasant. I won’t bother My Lady anymore, Dingnan gives you his thanks. Dingnan will come again in two days.”

He got up too fast, too sudden. Pingting was even more suspicious that it was something to do with her master. She turned hostile, “Perhaps another girl has arrived outside your home.”

Dong Dingnan couldn’t help thinking that she was suddenly very rude and was about to retort back when Pingting suddenly laughed. “I know, I know. Women don’t interest Mr Dong; war is what Mister likes. Of course I shouldn’t hold Mister back.”

Her warm laughter rippled out and his fingers twitched. Humour flashed in his eyes. “The Marquess of Jing-An, Gui Le, whom My Lady had mentioned today; maybe My Lady will see him in a couple of days.”

This struck her like lightning. Pingting almost dropped her tea cup. Could it be that her Master had been found, captured and held in the Dong Lin capital?

She was about to ask again, but Chu Beijie had already stood up. “My apologies, but I must leave immediately, goodbye.”

Pingting made a strangled sound, “Please Mister, don’t leave yet.”

Chu Beijie really seemed to be in a rush. He simply waved before rapidly walking away into the night.

Translation Notes:

- Autumn tiger was quite fierce: Autumn was still quite warm.
- Music critic: This is one of the double/triple meaning words. In this case, it most likely means music critic, but the deeper meanings, “soul mate” (friend) and “soul mate” (lover), could also apply. I translated the manhua’s version as “soul mate” but that was probably a mistranslation. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Pingting thinks Chu Beijie is so cocky.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 4

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch04

“Ah, the show’s finished” After Chu Beijie left, Lady Hua finally sneezed, jumped up and removed the blinds with a face of utter boredom. “He is such a battle freak. Only his appearance looks good. He didn’t even say anything fun. I wonder how you could even talk with him for such a long time. Hey Hong, why are you silent?”

Pingting was still feeling anxious and deeply thinking about what the leaving Chu Beijie had said.

Is there any news about Master?

Are all the people of the Jing-An Ducal Residence safe?

What is ‘Dong Dingnan’ doing right now?

He had a lasting impression and a smile as he discussed politics. He knew all the details about the war, just as well as Pingting, meant that he must be an important military commander.

Military commander? She began thinking through all of the important commanders of Dong Lin. The Duke of Zhen-Bei was the first name to come to her mind. She blinked, regretting she had not asked for a portrait of Chu Beijie earlier.

But wasn’t it be far too complex a coincidence for the Duke of Zhen-Bei to give her — a maid serving the House of Jing-An — a qin and requesting to see her?

Lady Hua saw that she was in a daze and laughed hard, “He’s already gone and look at your dazed expression. Already missing him?” She playfully waved her

hand in front of Pingting's face.

Feeling her touch, Pingting returned to her senses and told Lady Hua, "Sorry, I'm really tired. I want to retire to my room."

"You haven't eaten dinner yet."

"I'll eat more, tomorrow morning."

When Pingting returned to her room, she laid on the hard but clean bed and began to think again.

"Master..." She gritted her teeth. Her heart felt like a fire blazing gently in her chest. She began to get anxious. "Don't be so anxious, Pingting, being anxious will ruin everything." She quietly told herself.

Slowly, her messed thoughts got pulled back into order. She calmly took two deep breaths and closed her eyes. She pictured the Duke of Jing-An's flag; she remembered her Master, the Jing-An Ducal Residence, that last victory and the road home...

The Marquess of Jing-An had just won a battle, the army slowly marched. The radiant Duke of Jing-An's flag was fluttering high in the wind.

The commander in front was riding a huge magnificent horse. He wore a purple uniform adorned with a dragon emblem. Strips of metal gleamed on his shoulder. Gems, gold and jade hung from his waist luxuriously. He was the legendary He Xia.

That day, although He Xia had been victorious in war, he did not smile and was frowning very deeply.

"Master!" A girl's voice came from the crowd and the sound of hooves from behind.

Even though He Xia did not turn his head, he knew who it was. "Pingting, didn't I tell you to travel by carriage as you didn't feel very well in the last few days? Why are you riding a horse again?"

Pingting caught up to He Xia, and breathlessly said, "Who said I needed such care? I only coughed a few times but that damn Dongzhuo was so scared and immediately told Master. I was afraid that Master thought I got sick too often

and wouldn't let me come next time."

"It's not like you'll listen to me, even if I tell you to stay home, right? I'm just feeling sorry for you, a girl who's defenceless against a sword. Even if you get sick, there's no husband to look after you."

Pingting managed a small smile and twirled her wind-swept hair. "I'm not pitiful. Which maid has such a good life and is able to go with her Master to war?" She laughed twice but suddenly frowned, coughing.

He Xia turned his head, "What's wrong? If you haven't recovered, don't push yourself. The sun is very strong yet you still want to come riding with me. If you don't listen, I really won't let you come alongside the army next time."

Pingting quickly covered her mouth to hide her coughing. Glancing up, she saw that He Xia's face look concerned so she smiled gently. "Don't worry Master; I'm healthier than any horse. Her beady eyes studied He Xia for a moment, before lowering them, quietly saying, "I'm just afraid that... sigh, that when Master feels anxious, there won't be anyone beside you to cheer you up."

She sighed deeply and He Xia's heart melted. He gave a twisted smile while shaking his head, "You are such a strange maid. I can't hide anything from you." Seeing that Pingting hadn't her usual rosy cheeks, he smiled. "Come here then. Let me ride behind you on the same horse so you won't worry about it too much. Let's share our thoughts."

"Ok." Pingting nodded and slid off her horse.

He Xia reached out his hand and pulled Pingting onto his horse. He put one hand on her waist for support and the other one on the reins. He slowly gathered his thoughts and carefully chose his words, "Our opposition was the Dong Lin army. This war with Chu Beijie has lasted two months, on the surface we won but underneath we lost."

Pingting nodded, "Master is right. Though Dong Lin may have retreated, Gui Le had huge casualties. If Dong Lin attacked again, there's no way the Gui Le army would be able to hold up against them. If only the King was on Master's side and didn't stubbornly refuse to let Master take charge for two whole years, then the situation wouldn't've been so bad."

“Pingting, don’t carelessly criticise the King.” He Xia thought for a moment, “Just remember that the new King is not the Prince Su before he took the throne.”

Pingting bit her lip and thought hard. After Prince Su took the throne, he had indeed changed a lot. She swallowed her worry and tried to say comfortingly, “I understand why Master feels so upset but the number of casualties of our army is not Master’s fault. It has been a difficult two years. The King finally letting Master taking charge must’ve been because he wanted to embarrass you.”

“That’s exactly why I’m anxious. If we don’t win this battle and return to the capital, a lot of people will protest and even Father will be affected. The House of Jing-An holds far too much influence and power. Even if I were the King, I’d try to get rid of them as well.”

Remembering the new king’s cold behaviour after taking the throne was extremely unpleasant. The two immediately felt a chilling sensation running down their spines.

Seeing his own little maid frowning over the royal heritage problems, He Xia smiled. He reached out and using his thumb, gently smoothed out the wrinkles on her forehead. “Stop thinking about it. Let’s say some happy things. It’s thanks to you to think of the extremely clever plan of changing the course of the river to threaten flooding enemy troops when we led them to the mountains. Chu Beijie totally lost to that and had to retreat. Now everyone in the army knows that we have a female advisor. When we get back to the capital, I’ll make sure Father gives you a huge reward. Say, what would you like?”

“More rewards? The Duke has already given me enough rewards to last me more than ten lifetimes.” Pingting looked at the sky; the sun was slightly to one side, beside the high-raised Duke of Jing-An’s flag. She carefully looked back at He Xia then turned away again. In a quiet voice she murmured, “Master, there’s something I don’t know whether I should say or not.”

“What can’t you say to me?”

Pingting looked uncomfortable then suddenly cracked a smile. “Actually I won’t say it. If I did, you’d feel annoyed again.”

He Xia seemed to have guessed what Pingting had wanted to say and gave a

small smile in return.

Neither of them talked and the horse just plodded.

The horse's thumped against the sun-baked mud, leaving puffs of dust flying.

Pingting calmly gazed ahead, thinking deeply about something. He Xia knew that his clever little maid was thinking deeply about something, so he let the horse slow down even more and settled comfortably in the saddle.

After a while Pingting said, "I guess I'll try and say it anyway".

"I'm listening." When He Xia saw that Pingting had a serious look on her face, he immediately began to listen intently.

"Master, if my predictions were right, things will get worse even more. I'm not joking." Pingting turned her head and stared at He Xia in the eyes. In a nervous voice she said, "It's likely that Chu Beijie knows how weak our army is and can no longer fight well. If he comes again within two months, Gui Le's army will definitely perish. I'm sure he deliberately retreated when we were at our most vulnerable point so that...Master could go back to the Capital."

"You're right but why did he do that?"

Pingting's energetic black pupils rolled twice, it seemed that she already had the answer but she sighed, "If Master lost the battle, the King could, hypothetically, take advantage to cut away the House of Jing-An's enormous military power. Say, Master, he probably won't do that after just one defeat, right?"

He Xia shook his head, "Of course not. The House of Jing-An has been an important part of Gui Le in the past. If the King really decides to kill me, unnecessary blood will be shed and it will cause a riot."

"Then if Master wins and goes back, will the King reward Master?"

"If we win, of course the King has to reward us." He Xia then put in, "Though it's not like I want the rewards, but the King must reward and punish freely, to earn everyone's respect."

"If Master wins and returns to the Capital, the peasants will love Master even more. I believe the King will give Master rewards but deep down, he'll resent the

House of Jing-An even more. The House of Jing-An will be in danger then.”

“In other words, the King will feel threatened and try to get rid of the House of Jing-An. As soon as the Duke of Jing-An falls, Gui Le will be unstable and Dong Lin will take this as an opportunity to attack. Haha, Chu Beijie sure is crazy. What he wants isn’t just a few cities, but the entire land our Gui Le occupies.”

“You said that right!” Pingting clapped her hands, pleasure lit up in her eyes. She immediately changed from the serious army advisor to an energetic, cute maid. On her round face, two dimples appeared. Glancing back at He Xia, she smiled, “Master is so clever. Whatever Chu Beijie is plotting, Master will find the answer easily.”

He Xia couldn’t help laughing, “The cleverest person I know is our army advisor, Bai. If you were a boy, I wouldn’t be the main advisor anymore would I?”

Both people laughed. Though this cheerful sound did not stop, in their hearts, both of them felt uneasy.

The mud path ahead seemed very difficult to travel on.

Though their hearts were prepared, not even in their wildest dreams did they guess that in a blink of an eye, everything would change. Forever.

After a journey of five days, they finally arrived at the capital. Gui Le’s King, He Su himself, came to welcome them. The peasants of the city knew that the famous Marquess of Jing-An had won and returned. They rushed to greet him and they scrambled behind the two lines of somewhat serious-looking soldiers. Everyone had their necks craned forward, trying to get a better view of the stage.

“Which one is the Marquess of Jing-An?”

“Yer stupid. Have ya never seen the Marquess of Jing-An before?” Someone pointed, “That’s him, the ‘un in front of the army. Geez, who in the capital can’t recognise the Marquess of Jing-An?”

“Haha, this is my first time in the Capital. I came to visit my relatives. I never imagined I’d be able to see the Marquess of Jing-An with my very own eyes! When I get back home, I’ll have a lot of stories to tell!”

While the crowd continued to chatter, the army had already stopped at the city gates.

He Xia got off his horse. In a loud voice he shouted, "Hail the King. I, He Xia, has won the battle and Dong Lin has officially retreated."

He Su was completely covered in yellow-gold cloth. On his head he wore a headdress adorned with gems. More gems glittered from his clothes. He smiled slightly and personally helped He Xia up. "My Beloved Official, you may get up. Thank you for solving another one of my many problems. Gui Le is very proud of having the House of Jing-An and thanks to them we have nothing to fear about our enemies."

He picked up He Xia's hand fondly and they turned around.

"Look! It's him!"

"The Marquess of Jing-An!"

A ripple of excitement from the crowd of peasants.

He Su smiled at He Xia, "I cannot thank you, My Beloved Official, enough." He walked up the well-prepared stage and held up a cup of the best wine in Gui Le. He slowly announced, "To all those who have gathered here, please listen. Dong Lin has long been an enemy of Gui Le. After today's victory, we no longer have to live in fear and I shall repay our hero who has made this so."

Everyone nodded eagerly, wondering exactly how the ruler was planning to reward He Xia.

He Xia knelt down, "The victory was thanks to King, who directed everything. All He Xia, did was make the army follow King's plans. I do not deserve any reward."

"No no, you are Gui Le's best official. How could I not reward you?" He Su had another thought, "I will give you three rewards. First, I'll award you a cup of the best wine in Gui Le."

Behind He Xia, someone gave him a cup of the good wine. He Xia took it and raised his head to look at the King. He Su nodded, "You may drink."

He Su made sure he had finished the cup before saying, "Secondly, I'll give you

a precious sword. Someone, please bring it up.”

He Xia was presented with a long red box.

He Xia started to get a headache. He was getting even less sure of He Su’s real intentions. He could only reply, “Thank you, King.” He pushed open this lid and his eyes widened. “Ahh...”

An extremely precious sword laid inside the box. There was no sign of rust and the hilt was a jet black colour. It was a long lost sword, known as the “Precious Heimo Sword”. It was known that the blade was extremely destructive – one small cut would leave a nasty scar for a lifetime.

He Xia had lived in wealth for all of his life and so he took no interest in jewellery and the like, but he loved good weapons. Seeing the precious sword made him shout in surprise.

He Su laughed from the raised platform, “How is it? You like it?”

“This sword is too precious. How could King...”

“That’s why I have to give it to you. Everyone knows you like soldiers and weapons. Just take it.”

He Xia didn’t know whether to be shocked or happy. “Thank you, my King.” He turned back around and received the box.

Pingting had come up from behind and took the box from her Master. She was about to leave when He Su noticed her, “My, aren’t you Pingting?” He walked down the platform, breaking into a smile, “Why are you here with He Xia again?”

Pingting bowed, “I am here, my King.”

“No need. Back when you were still learning with He Xia, you memorised everything faster than us, and was acknowledged as a female genius. Back then, we visited the Royal Residence a lot too, and there were many beautiful women but not as clever as you! He Xia, you’re luckier than me.” He Su turned his head and laughed, “Anyway, the third is rather normal, jewellery and gold. I know you don’t like those kinds of things so I’ll just get someone to send them to Jing-An Ducal Residence.”

“Thank you, King!”

“We grew up together, we’re like brothers, so why the politeness?” He Su looked at He Xia fondly and looked at Pingting, who was planning to leave. “Pingting.”

Pingting felt rather tired and she was planning to quietly go back to rest in the carriage. Unfortunately, she heard He Su call for her and so she had to answer, “How may I help you, my King?”

She certainly wasn’t pretty, but her voice was charming like every word was bouncing off her tongue.

He Su quietly stared at her bowed head, thoughts elsewhere.

“My King?”

“Eh?” He Su came back to his senses and he paused before saying, “You may leave.”

Pingting quickly left, handing the box to another person, commanding, “Be careful with it, Master really likes this heavy black thingy.” Her learning ability was better than most and though she did know that this was the Precious Heimo Sword, she disliked weapons herself. She always called He Xia’s ‘darlings’ as ‘thingy’s’.

Master had returned victorious and the King had given him many rewards. Everyone in the Residence would eventually get their share.

The soldiers filled up exactly twelve tables and the Duke of Jing-An, He Mo, sat at the main table, grinning as he heard the compliments from the crowd.

He Xia was drinking a lot of wine too, probably three big bottles in total. Pingting could be counted as one of the important main people of her Residence, but she wasn’t present that evening.

Her room was far away from the bustling activity, very quiet. Pingting sat inside, she had lit up a lamp, making a dark silhouette outside.

“Pingting?” He Xia suddenly burst into the room.

Pingting put down her needle, raising her eyes and laughed. “Why is Master here when there are still so many guests?”

“To see you.” He Xia took her half-finished Mandarin duck, “They say that no

one is perfect, but honestly, I must disagree. You can do everything, not only are you good with song and poetry, but you can even scheme in war. Not to mention your intricate needlework is like a work of heaven.”

Pingting giggled, “No one compares needlework to heaven, you know? Quit playing with words.” She took her sewing back and did a few more stitches, but suddenly sighed.

“Pingting, has Father told you?”

“Yeah.”

“I only just learnt that myself, from Dongzhuo.” He Xia saw Pingting’s frozen smile, so he chose a chair and carefully chose his words. “Geez my father, he didn’t even consult me first.”

“The Duke told me that even though I’m not a concubine, my current status is much like one. He says that everyone in the Residence should be calling me “Madam” apart from Master’s future official wife, the Marquess.”

He Xia saw how Pingting was slowly opening up and his heart began to hurt. “Pingting, do you want to marry me?”

“Do I not suit you?” Pingting whipped her head around, staring intently into He Xia’s eyes.

“No way!” He Xia shook his head, suddenly got up and began to pace around the table. “I understand. For the last few years, we studied and played together, even learned how to fight and deal with horses together, but I’m only an older brother to you and you’re only a younger sister to me. If you marry me just like that, won’t you feel upset?” Seeing Pingting’s expressionless face, he tried again, “You’re unlike most girls. You have your own opinion. I just don’t want you to be upset.”

After some silence, Pingting quietly whispered, “If the Duke wants me to, so what can I do? Master should know that the Duke found Pingting on the roads and looked after her like his own daughter. Pingting is extremely grateful to the Duke so if he wants her life, she will give it.”

“Back then, who said that they wanted to find the best possible husband or else they would rather never marry and die a long death?” *She’s usually very*

clever, so why is she so sappy today? He Xia was already annoyed with Pingting's moans and sighs and the table seemed cracked from his thumping.

The two people were still discussion when Dongzhuo ran in. "Master, please go to the front courtyard. The King has given His Order. Oh yeah and apparently Pingting has to come too."

He Xia asked, "What does Pingting have to do with this Order?"

"Don't ask, you'll know when you get there."

The three people hurried to the front courtyard.

The front courtyard was no longer bustling with activity like before. It was very late into the night, and about seventy or eighty percent of the guests had already left. The remaining ones were extremely drunk and some of them were even snoring, drool falling onto the table.

A man, who was wearing royal service clothes stood there. When he saw them he said, "The King has given His Order: Please may the son of the Duke of Jing-An and Pingting meet him in the Royal Residence." After reading the order, his face broke into a smile, "Please may the son of the Duke of Jing-An also bring the Precious Heimo Sword. The King said so."

He Xia wondered aloud, "Why, it's so late, does King want to see us?"

"I guess I know." The messenger chuckled and said, "The Queen was talking to the King about how noisy the Jing-An Ducal Residence would be this evening. I don't know what exactly the Queen said, but the King started talking about how he used to see Sir practising swordsmanship, like a lion, while he studied. Miss Pingting, whose intelligence is so impossibly rare, would also be there, serving at one side."

"Ah, the King sure likes praising us today."

"Yes, yes, yes, so you see, the King's praises, made the Queen feel curious to see Sir sword dance, accompanied by Miss Pingting's qin. As Sir knows, the King is very devoted to the Queen, so he sent an Order, to take you two to their Residence." The messenger added, "The King also said that although it's very late, the moon is very large and round, perfect for moon gazing, which will be followed by sunrise later."

He Xia nodded, "I see." He turned back to Pingting, "Since the Queen wants to hear you play qin, bring our best qin."

Pingting went inside and not long later, she hurried back with her qin. She had also put on a chiffon cloth over a part of her face.

He Xia took five other servants, including Pingting and Dongzhuo. No one took the carriage, they were each on their own horse. All of the shops had long closed for the day. No lights were on, everyone was well asleep. The only sound that night was the steady beat of hooves, thundering on the stone pavement.

Seeing the messenger and his companions leading the way slowly, not far ahead, Pingting leaned towards her master. In a quiet voice, she whispered, "Master, the King is going to make his move."

"Yeah, I don't have a good feeling either." He Xia looked at the messenger's back view, "Except for the messenger himself, all of his companions are top assassins."

"King wants Master to bring the Precious Heimo Sword but it isn't stated clearly on the Order. He sent a messenger instead...this must be a trap." The horses' steps were slow and hesitant, as if sensing danger. Pingting reached out to pat the horse reassuringly, while saying, "I'm worried that the King plotted to make Master bring in the Precious Heimo Sword into the Royal Residence and then create chaos, so that His Majesty can frame Master for betrayal when royal military comes to back up."

He Xia looked around, "His soldiers are standing beside the footpath as well. If we attempt to escape, they'll definitely attack."

Dongzhuo was beside them, listening to every word. He gripped the edge of his seat, lowered his voice and muttered, "Yup, there's a murderous aura here." He had also been with He Xia for a while, so he could sense when danger was approaching.

The other servants were alert, keeping a close eye on their surroundings.

They were still only halfway there, but they knew that if He Su really was planning to frame them, entering the Royal Residence meant certain death.

"What should we do?" asked He Xia.

Pingting nodded slightly, “Well, I told the Duke about my suspicions as I went to get my qin. Although there are lots of people living in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, they should all be able to escape the capital city under the cover of dark. As for us...” She opened her palm, revealing five ink-black marbles.

Whatever that meant, He Xia himself knew.

“Okay!” Still speaking quietly, He Xia and Pingting nodded at each other.

“The Mister in front of us...please stop for a while.” Pingting’s high-pitched voice rang out.

The messenger and his companions turned forward and Pingting calculated the right time to throw the things in her hand. Sparks of fire shot out with a boom, instantly cutting off He Xia’s group and the messenger’s.

Clang! The Precious Heimo Sword was unsheathed.

“The King wants to hurt an official! Fight our way out!” Dongzhuo yelled.

As expected, more soldiers appeared on the two sides of the road.

The sky was filled with cries of battle.

“KILL!”

“GO! DON’T LET ANY OF THEM GET AWAY!”

“The King has given his Order: CAPTURE HE XIA AND THAT GIRL ALIVE!!”

Pingting raised her head and noted that there weren’t many soldiers on the enemy side. She secretly sighed in relief.

That’s how it should be. The House of Jing-An has been the managing the military for the last few decades, so using soldiers to assassinate them wouldn’t work. *But isn’t He Su worried that we might counterattack and attack his Royal Residence instead?*

“KILL!”

The men He Xia had brought were all excellent warriors who’d survived hundreds of battles, except for Pingting herself. It wasn’t long before they managed to break out of the enemy’s encirclement.

“The House of Jing-An has rebelled!”

“The King plotted against His Majesty’s loyal official! The King plotted against His Majesty’s loyal official!”

“The House of Jing-An rebelled!”

“The House of Jing-An must be destroyed!”

The cries of murder echoed the sky, blood splattered on the fighters’ faces yet both sides were still screaming for war.

Pingting couldn’t fight and usually hid behind He Xia. At the most she could only throw two or three light bombs. However, she did know that the bigger the chaos, the more likely the people of Jing-An Ducal Residence could escape.

She’d already run out of bombs by the time He Xia’s group were safely outside the city gates. Everyone was covered in blood and Dongzhuo had been cut twice, though his injuries weren’t life-threatening.

Leaving the city gates behind, it was like the battle had ended. Only the coarse breathing of the war horses could be heard in the cold night.

Pingting looked into the distance and then she pointed at a pillar of flames. “Look Master, the Royal House have begun to move. I hope the Duke is fine. I reckon the King thought he’d be able to capture us, so he didn’t send many people to our Residence.”

He Xia followed her finger, finding himself facing the direction of his home. He couldn’t stop worrying about his father, so he turned his horse around.

“Pingting, wait outside. We’ll check on Father and we’ll be back soon.”

Pingting knew she couldn’t fight and wouldn’t be of much use anyway. She jumped from the horse and said, “I’ll meet you all at that place in the mountains, where we often go.”

He Xia nodded, “Okay.” He led Dongzhuo and the others back inside the city.

Pingting watched these family-like people disappear. *He Su may be the King and an evil one at that, but he only dare uses selected people’s loyalty. The army won’t take sides at least until tomorrow morning, until the chaos is cleared and understood. With a neutral army, the residents of Jing-An Ducal Residence should be able to escape without too much difficulty.*

What exactly He Su would do the next morning was unimportant as her people would have safely escaped by then.

She checked her thoughts at least three times for any mistakes, before relaxing, and slowly leaving for the mountain cliffs where they promised to meet.

The cliff was two miles away. It would have been quite easy if she was on a horse, but it was a little more difficult on foot by herself.

Pingting walked on for a little longer and far away, she could see the sky changing to a grey-white colour behind the mountain ahead. She took a few more steps when suddenly she heard a rustling noise.....

Translation Notes

- King's Order: When the King can't say something personally, he gets someone to write up a "King's Order" on a piece of yellow cloth. A messenger takes it and reads it out to the recipient(s) on behalf of the King. The recipient(s) of the Order must obey whatever is written on it, or he/she may be punished for treason.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 5

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch05

Outside the window, a cat meowed and Pingting stirred. She opened her shining, energetic black eyes and faced the window, chuckling softly. “You’re an annoying cat, tomorrow I’ll definitely find a way to get back at you.” Suddenly she remembered that the House of Jing-An was still in danger, and her dimples disappeared.

“What should I do?” It was still dark and most of the inhabitants are still asleep, when she got up and fumbled for the table. She drank a cup of cold tea and continued to worry.

If I hadn’t been caught by human traffickers, I would still be by Master’s side and I wouldn’t have to worry about him. Dongzhuo is too cheeky and energetic, I hope he doesn’t annoy Master too much.

If I leave tomorrow, where should I go to find Master?

Though she was extremely clever, she was still quite young and couldn’t help feeling weak without the support of others. Suddenly, Chu Beijie’s face popped into her thoughts, his eyes seemingly able to see into one’s soul.

“Should I invite that fake Mister Dong here and demand the latest news?” But she knew that deep down, ‘Dong Dingnan’ was highly likely to be Chu Beijie, and therefore being around him makes her feel uneasy inside. “If I mess up...”

She thought of when she first received the Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin – it was the same uneasy feeling. But whenever she thought of ‘Dong Dingnan’ and the way he spoke of his experiences, his proud attitude... her face suddenly began to

feel very hot.

The vivid image of him in mind and her memory of receiving the Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin caused her heart to speed up. She thought of her conversations with Dong Dingnan, Dong Dingnan's experiences, Dong Dingnan's bold and extravagant actions...and her face for some reason, began to feel very hot.

Pingting kicked herself, stroking her cheeks she said, "Pingting, what are you thinking about? Finding Master is the most important thing at the moment." As she tend to her random thoughts or daydreams, the sun is already up.

After washing, she went inside to serve her Lady. When Lady Hua saw her, she clapped her hands, giggling. "You fell asleep before you could even eat dinner, so why are there dark circles under your eyes? I'm sure you were thinking about your lover all night, am I right?"

Pingting turned and looked at the mirror. As expected, there were dark violet smudges under her eyes. She blushed slightly, "What is My Lady joking about? Say that again and I won't serve My Lady anymore."

She had always talked to her Master like that back in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, and didn't think she was being rude. Fortunately Lady Hua had been flattered throughout her life and liked her temper. Trying to hold back her laughter, she said, "Don't be angry, I totally understand. When I first saw the guy of my dream, I couldn't sleep for the first couple of nights too."

Pingting wasn't originally thinking that, but Lady Hua's words made her heart thump and she lowered her eyes. "Let me help wash My Lady, the water is getting cold."

"I don't need you, clumsy girl, I can wash myself." She grabbed the dry towel off Pingting, "You were never suited to serve others in the first place."

"I'm not suited to serve others?" Pingting eyes widened. She had always been serving others, especially her mischievous master and no one had ever said she was doing a bad job. She could play qin and chess equally well, she was talented in both literature and art, while also being known for her entertaining wit and conversations, and she was considered to be extremely gentle. How is she not suited to serve others? Pingting had to protest back, "But in the previous days

when I washed you, I only broke a few strands of your hair.”

“Of course, because you have never helped people wash their hair before.”

Lady Hua was right. Back in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, she had her own maid to help wash herself. She had hardly washed her own hair, never mind helping others wash theirs. Once or twice, she had tried to wash her Master’s hair, but He Xia had shrieked in pain after a few seconds and she gave up on that idea.

After Lady Hua had washed, she continued to work on her sewing. Unfortunately, she had jabbed herself several times and was crying in pain after a while.

Pingting tried to hide her boredom. “I said it would take hard work, so why does My Lady still want to learn it? Everyday My Lady gets me to help and then gets hurt... What’s the point in doing this?”

Lady Hua sighed and stared blankly at her sewing. “What can I do? I miss him, so I sew for him, but then I get jabbed and so I hate him because it’s his fault I’m doing this. Then I remember he can’t see me, he doesn’t know what I’m doing. Oh God, I’m so annoyed!”

Pingting wanted to laugh but seeing her Lady being so depressed, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. The image of ‘Dong Dingnan’ once again came back into her thoughts, her vision blurred and her needle began to twist dangerously.

“Ouch!”

Lady Hua clapped, eyes sparkling. “You finally got jabbed. I say this needle is biased, it only likes to jab my thumb.”

The two people continued to talk on, though Pingting appeared to be fully engaged in the conversation, she felt anxious. She had secretly hoped that ‘Dong Dingnan’ would come so she could learn more of her master. Her eyes flicked from East to West and the day was rapidly ending, but no one came to visit them.

Lady Hua saw Pingting’s tight lips and she broke into a sweet smile. “Don’t worry, he said he will come in three days. If he doesn’t, we will just ignore him.”

Towards evening, the two girls were sitting inside and eating dinner when the

Housekeeper hurried in. “My Lady, someone wants to see you.”

Pingting abruptly lifted her head, eager. Lady Hua turned and said, “Let him in.”

The blinds came down and Pingting’s heart began to beat faster. She stared at the door with anticipation.

Soon, they heard footsteps approaching the door and a huge moving silhouette appeared. He entered the room and bowed respectfully towards the Lady on the other side of the blinds. “Good evening My Lady, my name is Chu Morang, and I am here to pass on a gift.”

Oh, so it wasn’t ‘Dong Dingnan’, but the person who had passed the qin to her previously. She thought in disdain. It felt as if someone just coldly splashed a bucket of icy water onto her fiery energy. She was utterly disappointed.

Chu Morang politely laughed, “This is one of GuiLe’s many bronze ornaments. It’s not that expensive, but the detail is rather impressive.”

Pingting looked out through the blinds, and she could tell at one glance that the ornament which Chu Morang has presented was in no way at all lacking. Not only was it expensive but it was carved by the famous Gui Le bronze master, Lu Bing. Lu Bing was a legendary craftsman who died thirty years ago.

The ornament was of a girl playing qin on the mountains, her expression realistic and serene. It was so lovely that many people wouldn’t mind having a painting of it. This ‘Dong Dingnan’ had probably given her this gift to compare its magnificence to her qin skills.

Pingting decided that ‘Dong Dignan’ spent money extravagantly and admired his tactics. “Such an expensive gift is hard to accept. Please take it back.” Her voice was notably cold.

Chu Morang protested, “Lady Hua, this is the Master’s gift, especially for you.”

“Last time it was a guqin, this time around it’s a bronze ornament, so what will it be tomorrow?” Pingting paused a moment before saying, “If his business meant for a barter of objects, I have nothing to give in return as I am a woman. However, if your Master wants something else, it probably won’t be as easy to get it.”

Lady Hua was clever and added another sentence from aside, “And he even gets someone else to give a gift on his behalf? How insincere, no wonder My Lady is angry.” She was smiling though. “Mrs Hua, send him off.”

“My Lady, please listen to Morang, actually...”

But Lady Hua wouldn't have any of it, “Not listening, not listening, not listening! You men only know how to hurt girls' hearts.” Maybe it was because she was thinking of her lover as well, and thus she vented all her resentment on Chu Morang, and decided to call for the housekeeper.

The housekeeper arrived before Chu Morang could even explain. She grabbed his hand, “Mister, please do not be angry, My Lady is tired, that's all. She needs to rest, as it is already dark.” Without saying another word she took him and the bronze statue out of the Hua Residence.

Chu Morang had never been so humiliated by his Master's orders, the Duke of Zhen-Bei Residence. In the Hua Residence, he had tried to be as courteous as possible because he was aware that it was the residence of the Lady his Master cherished. He went back to the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence and dutifully told his Master, Chu Beijie, about all the series of events that happened.

After he finished speaking, he placed the returned bronze ornament on the table.

Chu Beijie had been reading an official document when Morang had walked in. When Morang finally finished speaking, he laid the document down, raised his head and laughed heartily. “I never imagined she would have such a temper! If she was a man I would definitely put him in charge of my army. That's the quality of one of those capable of commanding thousands of soldiers possesses.”

After laughing a while he suddenly narrowed his eyes. “She's clever, I cannot afford to underestimate her.”

Chu Moran sighed, “She is very beautiful and her qin skills are extraordinarily. Since Master likes her, why don't you officially propose marriage to her tomorrow, alongside the Duke of Zhen-Bei's flag?”

“No.” Chu Beijie contemplated before saying, “It's a nice change from the usual drama here. She is a phoenix and I am simply the worshipper.” He stood

up, his cloak fluttering, “Well, I’m going to show my adoration now.”

“Now...?”

Pingting couldn’t sleep that evening either. She wondered if ‘Dong Dingnan’ would come the next day as she had sent his messenger away in disgrace.

If he did come, she’d first calm his anger, then... naturally ask about the House of Jing-An obviously....she sighed. Her eyes flickered from side to side, feeling anxious. Thinking about the possible but very likely conversation tomorrow with a man whose origins were unknown, yet was actively pursuing her, and she couldn’t help but worry.

Active pursuing was fine as she, Bai Pingting, despite wasn’t considered pretty, in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, she had had quite a lot of admirers. But this man was so domineering and good at psychological scheming, yet didn’t seem cunning at all. Everything about him just felt natural, not in an unpleasant way.

“Pingting, what are you thinking?” she asked herself, facing the window.

Outside, the moonlight was scattered all over the ground. She put on some clothes and went outside to admire the full moon.

Hua Residence’s replica of fountain in the daylight usually looked old fashioned but at night, it was rather soothing to look at. The residence was completely silent, even the insects were quiet. Looking up, Pingting could not help but stare at the moon. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash.

A tall figure was perched on the wall, causing Pingting to jump back.

Assassin!

Pingting was just about to yell for help when the figure flew, like it had grown wings, at her. She couldn’t even manage to open her mouth before a big hand clamped around her mouth and nose. The smell of an ordinary man flooded into her nostrils.

“Don’t speak,” the man commanded.

Pingting’s eyes twitched in surprise. *It’s him?*

Chu Beijie loosened his grip and quietly whispered in her ear, “Are you Lady Hua’s maid? I, Dong Dingnan, mean no harm. When I let you go, don’t you dare

call for help, alright?” He patted the sword at his waist, his words were polite, while his tone was friendly.

Pingting nodded and Chu Beijie could see an intelligent spark in her eyes, and he completely let go of her while chuckling quietly.

His eyebrows were dark, his eyes were bright, his nose was high and there was always a trace of a smile on his lips. It was the first time she had ever seen him up close, and as she remembered her previous memories of him, and she smiled back.

Chu Beijie had always been cherished and praised by the maids in his residence, so he took no notice of Pingting’s observations. Instead he asked, “Is the Lady asleep?”

Pingting was worried he would recognised her voice so she simply nodded.

Chu Beijie thought, *before heading to war, one must explore his enemy. This maid must always be around the Lady, so she must know what she likes.* Having this in mind, he asked, “Your Lady likes to play the qin, but do you know where she learned how to play like that?”

Pingting pointed at the throat and open her mouth twice.

Chu Beijie instantly understood, “You can’t speak.” He got up and walked right up to Lady Hua’s door, paused and listened. Then he just stood there.

What is this person doing? Pingting was fairly worried and refused to leave Chu Beijie side.

She wanted to ask about her Master, but now she was a maid and a mute, so she couldn’t afford to be anxious and ask questions.

Chu Beijie saw the worry in her eyes and thought that she had misunderstood his real intentions. “Don’t worry, I won’t disturb your Lady. I am merely sitting a vigil for my beloved phoenix.”

Pingting was stunned as she recalled the Dong Lin tradition. A man would stand outside his lover’s door and sit vigil for three nights. They were supposed to protect the person they liked and this usually took place three days before marriage. This ‘Dong Dingnan’ was brave in a way, to sit vigil for a girl who was

not yet engaged to him.

Her heart felt hollow because she was still lying to him. Pingting's eyes dropped, *I don't have any choice. If he finds out who I am or that I'm part of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, he will put me into jail, immediately.*

"You can go back to sleep."

Pingting looked at him, remaining there wasn't right but leaving him was rather awkward. *If he finds out that the 'Lady Hua' he has been talking to was not the real one, then....*

"Go, go back to sleep. This is a Dong Lin man's problem." Chu Beijie had decided to do this to earn the Lady's trust.

Pingting couldn't say anything against that, and went back to her room, head drooping.

Can I even fall asleep? She turned four or five times on her bed, telling herself, *I didn't ask him to sit vigil, so it's not my problem right?* But after a while, she felt really mean again.

She couldn't help quietly getting up again. She peeked out of the window.

Chu Beijie was still standing where Pingting had last seen him and he was staring off into the sky. He was tall and imposing. The dusky moonlight was evenly scattered on him, like a soldier of heaven had descended.

Pingting studied his aquiline nose, like a carver paying attention to the finest details. Chu Beijie suddenly moved and she ducked down, like a frightened rabbit. She was blushing.

She pressed her hand on her chest. It felt like her heart wasn't there anymore.

Why aren't you sitting down and having a rest?

Are you stupid, why do you have to be so serious about a vigil? It is not like there is anyone coming to check on whether you're standing or not, right?

Pingting hoped that the morning would come soon, then he would be able to get some rest too and she wouldn't have to worry about him anymore.

The sky finally became a grey-white, and Pingting hurried to the door.

But before she had actually gone outside her legs felt like jelly and she collapsed.

He hadn't slept for the whole night and she had watched him for the entire night too.

"Aren't we crazy?" Pingting laughed awkwardly at herself. She steadied herself before opening the door to greet Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie had stood for several hours, yet he did not appear to be tired. He had heard her footsteps and he saw yesterday's mute maid approach him.

"You woke up early today, is that because you have to help wash your lady?"

Pingting nodded.

Chu Beijie wasn't planning to talk to her, but when he saw her, he had a pleasantly warm feeling. He had seen many girls before, but none of them had the same golden aura, not to mention a maid having one. Their eyes accidentally met.

Her pupils shone like black crystals.

Her pupils could talk. At first glance, the light looked like a stream running into the blackness of her eyes, but the more he looked at them, the deeper they felt. Her eyes were hiding a thousand words.

Chu Beijie couldn't help saying, "Your Lady must like you as you have extraordinary eyes."

Pingting smiled slightly in reply and Chu Beijie added, "To have such a maid, one can imagine what the Lady is like."

Pingting felt like she had been slapped. Her expression didn't change even when she went into Lady Hua's room.

Lady Hua only just woke at the sound of Pingting's footsteps.

Pingting was quiet throughout the usual routines of washing.

"What's wrong with you today?" queried Lady Hua.

"Nothing much." Pingting debated whether to tell Lady Hua about 'Dong Dingnan' but she chose not to as Lady Hua was bound to mock her.

She was still very worried about her Master, but she was more afraid of people uncovering her identity if she were to ask too much. This pressure in her chest was unbearable enough, so of course she didn't want Lady Hua to laugh at her.

Let that guy stand. He can stand all he wants.

Lady Hua and Pingting finally managed to get out of the bedroom when Pingting came out. Chu Beijie was nowhere in sight.

“What are you looking at? Has the courtyard suddenly become prettier?”

Pingting looked again but Chu Beijie really wasn't there. She thought that the next day he would personally tell the Lady that he sat vigil for her all night. She hadn't thought that he would quietly leave when Lady Hua woke up.

Lady Hua pushed her from behind, “Let's go. The florist agreed to give me two bundles of purple peonies, let's go to the front courtyard to see if they have arrived or not.”

Pingting was still thinking deeply, about halfway there she suddenly exclaimed, “Ai-yaa!”

Lady Hua jumped back, “What?”

If Chu Beijie happened to stay in the morning, if the Lady and I happen to run into him, wouldn't our covers be blown? It's fine to let him know that I'm just a maid, but how do I explain my interest in Master's news? Pingting broke into a cold sweat, what was wrong with me last night? These things didn't even occur to me, I just stupidly watched that guy stand all night!

But whenever she thought of Chu Beijie and that night, she felt unexpectedly happy.

Translation Notes

- Fake mountain (05): Large decorative objects often found in large residences. They usually aren't safe to climb...
- Glowing pearl (05): This is a legendary pearl that glows. There other names, such as “luminous pearl” and “pearl that glows in the night.” It's often depicted to be green though probably not in this case

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 6

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch06

Pingting looked miserably at her dinner plate. Unexpectedly, Chu Beijie had not visited her that day but she however, had expected him to come and already prepared many questions for him.

The silence was so awkward that even Lady Hua thought that Pingting was acting strangely. She didn't boss Pingting around after dinner, letting her retire for the night immediately.

Pingting hadn't slept at all last night, and even though she was tired, she still could not rest. She opened her eyes wide and stared at the ceiling, her heart thumping madly. She rolled out of bed and peered out of the window.

As expected, there was an extra figure outside Lady Hua's bedroom's door.

He had that solemn, mysterious yet arrogant smile and Pingting quietly observed him. At first she tried to convince herself that he was just plain crazy, but after a long time, she decided that she didn't have the heart to leave him standing there alone.

Chu Beijie was going to stand all night again. He had had a lot of work in the Duke of Zhen-Bei Residence earlier, and when he returned tomorrow he was bound to have even more work. Yet he still came anyway, and he just stood there, thinking of the Lady playing the qin and their conversations, smiling.

He heard footsteps behind him and he turned around. "You again?"

Pingting lowered her eyes. In her hands, there was a chair with a leather cushion. She pointed at Chu Beijie then pointed at the chair.

“I’m not tired, I do not need to sit.”

Her eyes which were probably the brightest in the world, suddenly looked sorrowful, piercing his heart. Those eyes made him feel sad at rejecting her kindness.

She stared at him, anxiety, concern and confusion hidden in her eyes. They challenged him until he finally gave up saying. “Fine, fine. Thanks.”

Her cute eyes suddenly lit up, like there were two rare, glowing pearls in them. It was as if the ice in Chu Beijie’s heart seemed to melt, making him feel very comfortable and that sitting down had been a good choice.

Pingting saw Chu Beijie sit down and turned to leave for her own room.

Chu Beijie watched her while she withdrew to the inner part of the house, perplexed. But he remembered his promise to protect his phoenix and looked away.

After a while, he heard footsteps approach him again. Chu Beijie narrowed his eyes, but did not turn around. As expected, Pingting came back. She put a large plate on the ground. On the plate there were little cups and a jug. It even had some cute snacks on it.

“You sure thought things through.”

Pingting had walked a long way to get the snacks from the kitchen. When she heard him praise her she couldn’t help but smile appreciatively in response.

Her smile slowly came out, however it wasn’t like only her lips was smiling, but it seems like every inch of her face was smiling radiantly. Chu Beijie was suddenly dazed, she was truly beautiful. But when he looked closer, he realised that she was only the mute maid, with two big eyes but nevertheless still rather plain.

He had seen Lady Hua’s portrait, she was beautiful.

Pingting was surrounded in moonlight, and Chu Beijie just stared, as if he was a little drunk. *This man has a really strong presence, even here in the Hua Residence. Although he may be sitting in a chair now, his figure is still far bigger than anyone else. Is he a real man?* As Pingting stole another look at him, a tiny, annoying voice flicked across her mind, reminding her of her Master.

“Yes, if I ask him about Master right now, would he answer? The moon is mellow and his expression is rather soft. It probably wouldn’t hurt to ask a question or two.”

Chu Beijie’s determined face bumped Pingting back into reality. *“Now way, how could I do that? This isn’t just some average man obsessed with love.”*

Her thoughts had become a scrambled mess and she quickly remembered her real identity. *“Maid Pingting, liar Pingting.”* She felt utterly useless and rotten to the core. She abruptly stood up, not caring about Chu Beijie’s gaze, and returned to her own room.

Hiding behind the window she watched Chu Beijie for the whole night again.

The next day Chu Beijie was gone.

But Pingting now hadn’t slept for two whole nights, and her coughing had started again. She even had a fever and was very sick.

Lady Hua knew she was sick and ordered her people to find a doctor. She calmly said, “Take your medicine. I’ll get someone else to serve me for now, so don’t you dare leave this bed today!”

Pingting felt rather light-headed but she knew her health was important. She took Lady Hua’s words to heart, taking her medicine and having a good rest.

When she woke up, the sky was already dark.

Lady Hua had just finished eating dinner and had come to check on her. “You really slept for the whole day, I’d say you do look much better too. Your ‘Dong Dingnan’ came today, but I didn’t dare say a word, so I pretended my throat was sore and sent him away.”

Pingting answered *“Huh”* and hurriedly sat up, shaking the bed.

“Don’t worry, if he really likes you he will come again.”

Pingting was really upset, as she had missed a good chance to find out more about her Master. Time was rapidly passing and she still had no idea when she could get back to the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Most importantly, the longer she stayed at the Hua Residence, the more her heart went wild, as if spiralling out of control.

She felt as if she were in quicksand. It wasn't good to move but it wasn't good to stay still either.

Lady Hua didn't know what she was thinking so she assumed that Pingting was still slightly agonising from her headache. She told her other maids to bring Pingting some food and medicine and then she quietly left.

That night, Chu Beijie came again. He was still standing outside Lady Hua's bedroom, but he was listening intently to his surroundings. The mute maid's figure seemed to circle and circle around him but whenever he tried to grab it, it would disappear. Chu Beijie wasn't very happy with himself, *aren't I here to protect my phoenix?* He felt disappointed not to be loyal to the person he liked but unfortunately for him, he could just not forget the maid's eyes.

Those shiny pupils that seemed to silently convey a thousand words.

He once again heard footsteps and a happy tune floated in his mind. He turned around eagerly. Suddenly his face darkened, "What's wrong?"

Pingting was taking slow steps, as if she was going to collapse any time. Chu Beijie held out his hand, then grabbed her wrist to steady her.

Her hand was abnormally warm.

"You're sick?" he asked.

Pingting shook her head rapidly, trying to hide the tears in her eyes. She had spent a long time being alone and although Lady Hua, Mrs Hua and Mother Chen had all been worried about her, she had never felt happier listening to the short question this person had just asked her.

Those two words were enough to comfort her.

She gave a small smile and Chu Beijie saw her sad little dimples. That sight captured Chu Beijie's heart. He had completely forgotten about his beloved phoenix. He rushed forward, and collected her in his arms protectively.

"Is that your room?" He asked.

Pingting nodded. She wanted to protest but instead she bit hard on her lip.

Chu Beijie carried her swiftly to her room.

“Go rest. It is very late and you’re sick. Doesn’t your Lady look after you?” He went into her room and placed Pingting gently on the bed.

He always did what he what he wanted, and cared nothing for gender customs. He clumsily tucked Pingting into bed, before straightening up.

“Sleep.” He watched the eyes he liked, closed. His voice had lost its usual colour and the way he told Pingting to go to sleep was more like the everyday voice he used to command his soldiers.

Pingting, however, only felt comforted by it. She closed her eyes obediently but opened them after a while.

Chu Beijie was thinking of leaving when he realised that this ‘soldier’ had not listened to him. “Close your eyes, go to sleep.”

Pingting suddenly felt amused, it reminded her of teasing her Master. She opened her eyes again and stared quietly at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie suddenly felt his heart speed up upon meeting her gaze and a feeling he had never felt before flooded through him. It was even happier than the pleasure and rush he felt on the battlefield.

He wasn’t too pleased about this, because as the Duke of Zhen-Bei, he’d been through all sorts of situations and was always been able to have what he wanted. It was like one of his heart’s muscles had been torn, leaving him with heavy breathing.

The little mute on the bed was undoubtedly a beauty; ignoring her face, nose and mouth. She had an incomparable elegance which no one else had and that was what made her beautiful.

“Close your eyes.” Chu Beijie cleared his throat, “I’m going out.”

Pingting felt rather disappointed but this time she really close her eyes.

Chu Beijie was a true gentleman, he really went out.

Another night. Tougher than last night; tougher than the night before.

Pingting only fell asleep in the morning and she slept until noon. Lady Hua hurried in and whispered in her ear, “Do you know who Dong Dingnan is?”

Pingting heart thumped a little.

“I’ll tell you, he is Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei! I saw his portrait yesterday but oh God, he’s the mighty Duke of Zhen-Bei!”

Pingting suddenly paled, her body gave out twice before she managed to prop herself up with difficulty.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei? Dong Dingnan, that was the guy who sat vigil at night, the man who carried her was the Duke of Zhen-Bei — A duke of Dong Lin, Dong Lin’s strongest warrior, Gui Le’s enemy and Master’s scariest opponent.

Lady Hua must have thought this was a miracle and kept on praising Pingting. She then patted her on the shoulder, saying, “Hong, we’re like sisters, so you will help me right?”

“Eh?”

“It’s easy, I’ve already sent Mrs Hua to pass a letter onto the Duke of Zhen-Bei. It says that Lady Hua is currently engaged and not a free woman. It says that if he is willing to exert his authority and cancel my marriage, it will be easier to carry things out in the future.” Lady Hua looked pleased at herself, “This time Father won’t protest against it and when my marriage is cancelled, I’ll tell the Duke of Zhen-Bei the truth. I’ll even give you a good wedding dress. Oh yeah! You can have my wedding dress.”

Pingting’s face clouded halfway through Lady Hua’s chattering. “Are...are...you crazy? The Duke of Zhen-Bei is much stronger, ten times stronger, than your family. If he finds out that we’ve been lying to him, the people of the Hua Residence will be in deep trouble.” She was still very sick so she couldn’t emphasise how serious this was.

Lady Hua took no notice, “He likes you. I’m sure he won’t mind the fact that you borrowed my identity.”

“It’s not like that!” Pingting grabbed her, “Tell Mrs Hua not to send the letter.”

Lady Hua felt a little scared seeing Pingting so angry. Her head drooped in shame, “But Mrs Hua just came back, she even told me the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s response.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, tomorrow, Lady Hua will be free again.”

“Tomorrow?”

Lady Hua saw Pingting’s strange expression and she pouted. “I need to practice qin, talk to you tomorrow.” Then she left.

Pingting stared into space for a while, until she re-organised the events in her head.

“No way, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, he really was the Duke of Zhen-Bei....” Pingting thought deeply for a moment, then the light in her eyes flashed, showing that she’d made her final decision. *“I still haven’t found Master, I can’t be bound here for no reason. As for Hua Residence...good luck.”*

She somehow managed to get up and pack up her belongings. She felt rather heartless when she thought of how kind the people of Hua Residence had been to her. No matter what though, she still had to go. She was in Dong Lin, the enemy’s country, and if the Duke of Zhen-Bei ever found out her real identity, the Hua family would in even more trouble than before.

She went through a rarely used back door and no one noticed. Just like that, Pingting had left the Hua Residence behind.

That night she stayed at a restaurant. She was probably used to seeing Chu Beijie sit vigil as she could not fall asleep, leaving her thoughts to repeatedly torment her throughout the night.

What was truly worrying however was the fact that her coughing was getting worse. One cough after the other, no sign of it getting any better.

The city was very quiet, the next day. She was too sick to go outside so she asked one of the staff about the outside world, but apparently nothing notable had happened.

She coughed another night away. On the morning of the third day, the worker gave her some boiling water. “Something big happened last night! The rich Hua family, for some reason, has made the Duke of Zhen-Bei so angry that he has ordered all of them to be beheaded.”

Pingting was suddenly alert but she tried hard not to look too interested. "What? All of them are to be beheaded?"

"I don't know what has made the Duke of Zhen-Bei so angry." The worker sighed, "The Hua family must have done something extremely shameful to deserve something like this. Our Duke of Zhen-Bei is actually very kind."

Pingting hadn't heard the last two comments. She had guessed that Chu Beijie would be very angry, but she hadn't expected him to sentence so many people to death.

Chu Beijie's strong yet stubborn face crossed her mind and she closed her eyes. Yes, she had always known that he could not be trusted. He may be a gentleman, but when it came to war, he was the bloodiest demon ever. Pingting had heard about the Duke of Zhen-Bei's cruelty and the blood shed from Gui Le soldiers was more than enough to flow a river.

"Is he going to kill all of the people of Hua Residence?" Pingting stared at the table and chair in front of her, which was slowly blurring away with her tears. She shook her head, *"No way..."*

Even if the Duke of Zhen-Bei destroyed ten big families like the Hua family, the people of Dong Lin wouldn't protest at all.

Sir Hua, Lady Hua, Mrs Hua, Mother Chen, You'er, Zi Hua....all of these people's heads would be cut off, leaving a bloody mess. Pingting chest tightened, like she was about to vomit.

"No, I can't just sit and watch them die." She gripped the sides of the bed, slowly pulling herself up.

The Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence was even more solemn than usual and two lines of guards stood outside. The maids serving inside were walking on their tiptoe and if anyone had an itchy throat, they had to secretly go to a place far from the Duke and cough there.

Even Chu Moran, who was usually so calm, was sweating while standing inside his office.

Chu Beijie looked up from his official papers, "You're hot?"

“No.”

“Wipe the sweat off your face then.”

“Yes.”

Chu Beijie wasn't quite as flustered as Pingting had imagined.

Two days ago, he had dealt with Lady Hua's fiancé's household to undo the Lady's engagement. He had spent the whole night preparing for the Lady but when he visited her again, she had told him the truth. He hadn't rolled his eyes, hadn't yelled at them and hadn't lost his temper either. He just stood in front of Pingting's room for a little while and then left.

Back then, Lady Hua had thought the danger had already passed. She had smiled innocently at the housekeeper, saying, “Well I was right wasn't I? The Duke of Zhen-Bei is a really kind person, Hong was really worried for no reason.”

Back in the Residence, Chu Beijie had sat down and slowly sipped a cup of hot tea. Chu Moran stood at one side, trying to keep his breathing quiet, for he knew that his Master was beyond cross. He was extremely angry.

As expected, after the cup of hot tea he quietly ordered, “Tomorrow, at sunset, execute the entire Hua family in front of this Residence.”

Finally hearing Chu Beijie's voice, Chu Moran sighed in relief. “Yes.”

“Don't miss out on anyone, even the dog,” Chu Beijie added.

Now the sun was about to set. All members of the Hua Residence were bound and crying. The guillotine's blade had been sharpened, as if waiting for the Duke of Zhen-Bei's command to chop its victim's sleek neck.

“Duke,” Chu Moran looked at the sky, “It's about time.”

“It's time?” Chu Beijie looked around, and it was unnaturally silent. He looked at the sky, yet the miracle he was hoping for had not occurred. His face turned stone cold and an unusual bloodthirsty sneer appeared on his face. “Execute them.”

But before his words could be registered, they were replaced with soft music. The luxurious sound bounced off the walls of the Ducal Residence, through the windows and into Chu Beijie's ears.

“When there is trouble, there are heroes.... when there are heroes there are beautiful women. Surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil...” It was faint, but it was definitely the song back then. He couldn’t help smiling at the warm and pleasant tone...

“If there are soldiers, there will be fame; if there is fame, there will be fraud; soldiers know fraud, soldiers know fraud...”

The qin’s sound was very pleasant to hear. At times it would be as delicate as a spider’s thread, other times it would appear like a soaring bird, high up into the clouds, but other times flying low, just above the grassy plains below.

The corners of Chu Beijie’s mouth lifted.

Chu Moran was too amazed at the amazing sound and had only just remembered to pass on his Master’s order. But he suddenly heard Chu Beijie say, “Don’t kill them yet. Bring the girl who’s playing that qin into my Residence.”

“Yes!”

Soon Chu Beijie’s eyes landed upon the jet-black iris he loved yet hated at the same time.

This time her eyes were trained on him, not angrily, not mischievously, not scared nor even pleased. Pingting just watched him and humbly bowed. “I am here, Duke.”

Chu Beijie was surprised to hear the familiar voice from behind the blinds. He pursed his lips.

Narrowing his eyes at her, he said, “Today my perception of life seems to have widened. You are the Lady and the maid. You are mute yet you can sing. If there is anything else you can do let me see it.”

The Duke of Zhen-Bei’s voice was threatening, which was usually enough to make the bravest of warriors shake, yet she was neither angry nor afraid.

Pingting smiled, pretending to look hurt, “Duke is angry?”

Chu Beijie harrumphed coldly, asking a question instead, “I’m assuming you fully understand that ‘soldiers know fraud’ meaning; that while sometimes fraud leads to victory, fraud can also lead to disastrous defeat?”

“The victor will always decide the fate of the defeated.” Pingting’s face turned serious and she sighed, “If so, then feel free to punish me, Duke.” She bowed her head.

Chu Beijie secretly smiled at her bowed head. He grabbed the jade pendant on the table and slowly thumbed it. “I know what your point is, you don’t want the Hua family to be destroyed. I guess that’s a pretty good conscience for a maid. Fine, I’ll forgive the Hua family for now, but...” He thought for a moment and coldly said. “You must stay here.”

“Stay in the Ducal Residence and serve Duke?”

Chu Beijie mused, “Or do you plan to be my duchess or something?”

Without another word, she slowly bowed at him.

Translation Notes

- Black eyes: In some parts of China, it’s considered that the darker they are, the better one looks. But usually it’s just a ‘very dark brown’ that is similar to the pupils in shade. Elegant Destroyer (proofreader/assistant) supposes it’s rather like obsidian because it’s so dark it reflects tiny bits of colour.
- Marriage: In China, traditional clothes are usually red. This includes most orient countries, such as India and Pakistan.
- Real man: It’s said that men are best when they’re gentlemen (polite etc.), well-educated and strong.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 7

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch07

Hong, her name was Hong. This name wasn't as interesting as the person herself. Chu Beijie had just gained another common maid but he felt much more excited than usual for some reason. It was like he'd come across a 'once-in-a-lifetime' preciousness, or a deliciously exotic cuisine and couldn't wait to taste it, but at the same time, couldn't bear to ruin it.

The new maid, Hong, had lied to the Duke of Zhen-Bei, had been caught by him and was now locked in a small room of his Ducal Residence, away from everyone else.

Chu Beijie wanted to see her, but for some reason he kept on stopping himself.

He wasn't a god, so of course he was angry. Several times he had woken up in the middle of the night, grinding his teeth and fists clenched, thinking that he, a Duke, got all messed up by a maid and ended up standing in front of another woman's door. His pride as a man was absolutely torn into shreds. He wanted to torture that damned girl, throw her into jail, leave her in the forest to the wolves and then throw her off a cliff.

"Someone!"

"Here! What does Duke need?"

Chu Moran appeared at the doorway but Chu Beijie had suddenly calmed down again.

No, he couldn't let her die so easily. That girl should stay in his residence for her whole lifetime, to repent for her crimes. He'd sometimes go to tease her, and

make her cry.

The next day, Pingting got sick, just when Chu Beijie had planned to taunt her.

“Sick?” Chu Beijie’s eyes flickered towards Chu Moran and he coldly laughed, “Is this another one of her deceptions, ‘soldiers know fraud’?”

“The doctor has already seen her. She is seriously sick.” Chu Moran replied, his voice grave.

Chu Beijie’s eyes flashed, “What does she have?”

“Long-term symptoms, continuous coughing and drowsiness.”

Chu Beijie thought of that night when Pingting had also been sick, and he had personally carried her into her room. He remembered those energetic eyes slowly close and how under the moonlight, he had truly thought she was a real beauty.

“Duke...are you going to see her?”

A sharp gaze turned to Chu Moran, forcing him to take a step back. He lowered his head and hurriedly said, “I-I-I just thought...maybe...”

Chu Beijie looked away and sat back at the desk, grabbed an official document and carefully read it. Then in a hesitant voice, he asked “Which doctor did you hire?”

“Chen Guanzhi.”

“She’s just a maid, no need to provide her a famous doctor.”

Chu Moran had hardly ever been criticised by his Master and he paled, “Okay, I’ll change it immediately...”

“No need,” Chu Beijie picked up a pen, flamboyantly wrote two lines of approval on the document. He seemed to have calmed down a little, “He’s already been hired, so don’t bother anymore.”

“Yes.”

“Is she taking her medicine?”

“We’ve already bought the items on Chen Guanzhi’s prescription and it’s currently being boiled.”

Chu Beijie scowled, “She rebelled against me and yet she still gets a famous doctor and boiled medicine. Nice timing to get sick. Unfortunately for her, I’m a warrior from the blood-stained deserts, not a naive boy from flowery plains. When she gets better, tell her to stop playing her games in my residence.”

Chu Moran could sense his master’s wrath and he remained as quiet as possible, nodding, “Yes.”

He was about to leave when Chu Beijie looked up from his documents again, as if he had another thought. “The King gave me two boxes of Yumei Tianxiang pills. Since we don’t have any high-ranking females in this residence, I thought they’d go to waste. Now that we have an ailed woman here, we can give those to her.”

Pingting really was sick. Although she was naturally healthy, she had never quite recovered from the cold she had from the last outing, which had been followed by a series of numerous incidents. Her strength was steadily leaving her body. During the last short conversation she had with Chu Beijie, her clothes were almost soaked in sweat and she could barely stand anymore.

Chu Moran was in charge of looking after Pingting. Unable to guess his Master’s true intentions, he didn’t dare to act too nice or too mean to her. After a long while of considering, he finally put her in a small building in a secluded part of the Ducal Residence.

Every day, Chu Moran would report Pingting’s health. “Miss Hong was rather drowsy today.”

“Miss Hong had some porridge.”

“Miss Hong coughed a little less last night, but she had a high fever this morning.”

Chu Beijie didn’t say anything and pretended not to hear.

On the fifth day however, Chu Beijie felt rather edgy. When he heard Chu Moran say “Miss Hong coughed again today...” he suddenly turned furious. “Cough!Cough! Cough! Why is she still coughing? Haven’t you already given her the Yumei Tianxiang Pills? That Chen Guanzhi is also to blame...he can’t even cure a girl.”

Chu Moran left and the next day, he was keen not to make the same mistake

as yesterday, “Her coughing has gotten a lot better. She should be able to get up soon.”

“And when is that?”

Chu Moran hadn’t expected his Master to answer, nevertheless to even ask a question. “Maybe... around ten days,” he said uncertainly, as how was he supposed to know?

Chu Beijie harrumphed once, not acknowledging or denying his statement.

By the tenth day, before Chu Moran could begin his daily report, Chu Beijie stood up and declared, “Let’s go and visit her to see whether her ‘desperate measure’ has come to an end.” He briskly strolled out of the office, and headed to the room Pingting was living in.

The building had a little courtyard outside it and small, unknown red flowers were planted there.

Chu Beijie briskly walked right up to the door but suddenly paused and moved towards the window. He heard a conversation, one of the voices very familiar.

“Anything else?”

“Way more.” A soft, gentle voice, with a hint of humour. “For example, when making bone soup, cut the bone in parallel, horizontally, revealing a line of marrow. Don’t break it and bind it with chestnut, or you’ll lose its unique flavour. Mix rhodiola, cynomorium, powdered lemongrass roots, fry the mixture and put it into the soup. Add the bones and wait for it to be half-cooked before adding fresh lotus roots and carrot. After that, close the lid and boil lightly until fully cooked.”

“Strange, I’ve been working in the kitchens for many years, but I’ve never heard of such a recipe. Wow, I’m hungry just by listening to that.”

Chu Beijie continued listening for a while. They were all top cooking techniques, despite most of them hadn’t been heard of.

Pingting felt a little better and somehow she had started a discussion about cuisine with Mother Zhang, who had been bringing her medicine ever since she was sick. Her passion was back and she gave away some of her food preparation

techniques. Neither of them had heard Chu Beijie outside, so when Mother Zhang looked up and saw him, she broke into a cold sweat.

“Ah! Duke...” Mother Zhang jumped up and managed a wobbly bow.

Chu Beijie didn’t even look at Mother Zhang, his eyes were fixed on Pingting’s cheek, which still hadn’t returned to its usual pinkish radiance.

Mother Zhang nervously excused herself, “I...should be getting back to the kitchen.” She hurriedly picked up the medicine bowls and backed away, nearly tripping over.

The room was even quieter, now that one had left, and it seemed an empty sort of coldness. Chu Beijie’s handsome chiselled features were expressionless and he had the same temperature as a winter day.

Pingting met his eyes, but she quickly lowered them when she felt her heart thump madly.

“Duke is here?” she slowly began to get herself out of bed, managing a slight bow, “I wish Duke good health.”

Chu Beijie narrowed his eyes, clasped his hands at his chest and used a posh voice, which most royalties used. “I heard you were sick?”

Pingting had originally thought that when she was sick, Chu Beijie would visit her because he’d remember their previous times with each other and be nice to her. Then she’d ask about her master and escape. But she’d been sick for ten days, and there’d been no news of Chu Beijie. She told herself it was only natural, but deep down in her heart, it ached bitterly.

He continued in a mocking kind of question, “You’re not beautiful and without the blinds, you can’t play this seduction game, so you’ve swapped to the desperate measure game?”

Seeing Chu Beijie had made her feel happier, but hearing his cold words made her feel completely upset. She mumbled to herself, “I AM sick”.

At that moment, all the pain in her heart from the events that had happened since the separation from her Master, seemed to overwhelm her. Two shiny, transparent tears trickled down her cheek.

Chu Beijie didn't hear the reply to his question and was about to yell at her when he saw her shoulders quivered. Bending down, he saw two reddish eyes and a tear-stained face. The person in question had become a crying mess, ever so quietly.

"What are you crying for?" He frowned, "Shut up."

She didn't want to cry in front of the Duke of Zhen-Bei or infuriate him, so she bit her lip hard.

Chu Beijie watched her. He then grabbed her shoulders, helped her up and said "Don't bite your lips. You may cry now."

Pingting's wet eyes flickered towards Chu Beijie, her head not moving, refusing to let go of her lip.

Chu Beijie didn't like being disobeyed. He grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. "If you cry, I'll kill the people of Hua Residence."

Pingting looked at Chu Beijie's eyes, they were serious. *What is Hua Residence to him anyway?*

When she finally let go of her lips, there was a slight dent on them. She quickly dried her tears and made an unyielding face as she raised her eyes towards Chu Beijie, not wavering even one bit.

What she didn't know was that expression made Chu Beijie's heart skip a beat.

"I've seen a lot of women cry. It's utterly useless." His words were very close to Pingting's ear and her hammering heart threatened to jump out of her chest.

"Sit here," he said breezily, pulling her into his arms.

"Ah....."

"Don't move, or else you'll fall" An unusual powdered scent filled his nostrils. Letting his hand brush across Pingting's face intimately, he asked, "Hey, what powdered scent are you using?"

Pingting was both nervous and embarrassed, for Chu Beijie's smell and heat were clouding her thoughts. She thrashed about weakly, trying to push the mountain-like body away, half wanting it, but half rejecting it. After a while, she gave in and started to relax but still with a roll of her eyes; accepting herself to

suffer in Chu Beijie's arms.

"Does it smell nice?" She deliberately softened her voice, her tone like the women at brothels.

She was good at it, for Chu Beijie felt himself stiffen.

She smiled even more sweetly and looked right into his eyes, "You are a well-educated man so I'm sure you've heard of Sifang grass right?"

Chu Beijie's eyes were like lasers, wanting to pierce through Pingting's cheek.

"Sifang grass is an extreme poison, the leaves appear in four colours and its scent is rather sweet." Pingting replied, "I rebelled against the Duke, meaning my life will be a living hell, so I might as well just end it all by dying."

She's just a maid, where could she get such a poisonous plant? Chu Beijie didn't believe her at all, but seeing her cute eyes made him hesitate slightly. "Since it's such a rare poison, I must try it." He squeezed Pingting's shoulder, locking her in his arms more tightly and slowly raised her lips towards him.

She could feel his breath against her cheek.

Pingting, although pampered at her residences, had never experienced this kind of situation before. As the man approached her, she was suddenly at a loss. Despite her confusion, she managed to shout, "Moran! Hurry up and tell the King that the Duke of Zhen-Bei kissed me!"

Chu Beijie was confused.

They heard a crash outside. Chu Moran had really been outside and had heard everything. He had knocked over a flowerpot in surprise when Pingting started to yell for him.

"Go tell the King, that His Majesty and the Queen won the bet! The Duke of Zhen-Bei really kissed me!"

It was all too sudden and Chu Beijie thought he had fallen into a trap of some sort. Pingting took this opportunity to kick free with all her remaining strength, roll away and now she was sitting at the opposite end of the bed, hugging her knees protectively while glaring at him.

As she rolled away, Chu Beijie narrowed his eyes, realising that he'd fallen for

her trap. “You tricked me,” he said in a dangerous voice.

“Beautiful women come flocking to Duke at the wave of your hand, why does Duke want a lowly maid like me?”

“I can choose any woman I want, so why can’t I choose a maid from my very own residence?” Chu Beijie smiled angelically and pointed beside him, “Come here.”

Pingting was really scared, and even now she refused to budge. However amidst her pale stricken self, she managed to stifle a laugh, “It’s easy to have Hong, but Duke will have to bet with me first. If Duke wins, Hong is willing to do anything Duke wants.” She had often made bets with her Master and she already knew what she would bet on in a split second.

“Bet?” Chu Beijie pretended to think deeply for a moment, then laughed heartily, “We don’t need to bet on anything as you’re mine already, aren’t you?” Pingting fell silent, clearly unimpressed. Surprisingly, Chu Beijie added, “But I don’t want you now. Get better first.” He gave her a meaningful look and quickly left the little room.

This time, Pingting was the one who was confused.

After a while, when his back view had disappeared, she came back to her senses. “Geez, such a difficult person to deal with. He uses his retreats to advance further, playing hard to get. Girls’ feelings just dance in the palm of his hand.” Despite her dark thoughts, she suddenly blushed a bright red as she gazed upon the setting sun outside her window.

Translation Notes

- Desperate measure: When there’s nothing you can do but hurt yourself, to earn other people’s sympathy, in order to get what you want.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 8

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch08

Pingting had spent the last three days resting but she was clearly distracted.

The flowers outside were in full bloom, and they were an extremely enchanting red. However, Pingting's eyes flickered past them, her eyes resting on the lush green leaves.

Chu Beijie hadn't visited her in the last three days.

"It's fine if you don't come..."

She had spent the last three days worrying, afraid of Chu Beijie visiting her again but afraid of him forgetting her little room too. "What kind of command is 'get better first'?" She continued to think and blushed a light pink, as if there was a cute kitten playing with her heart. Mother Zhang even said, "Miss Hong, you seem much better, for you cheeks are pink and tender."

That afternoon, Chu Moran entered her room, passing on Chu Beijie's words.

"No appetite, so make a few dishes and take them to Duke's room."

Cook? Pingting bit her lip, slowly heading for the kitchen.

Chu Beijie was in a good mood today. He waited for three days when usually, as the Duke of Zhen-Bei, he'd get whatever he wanted immediately. He was looking forward to getting along with his cute and intelligent maid.

Hong wasn't pretty, but was interesting enough to deserve his effort and time. Thinking of her and their moments together made him smile a little. Their meeting was sort of destiny as well; for after all, he was a Duke and she was just a lowly maid.

“Besides, she had already suffered from her sickness for ages, God’s punishment was enough for her”, he thought to convince himself.

Chu Beijie didn’t usually forgive people yet he easily forgave this talented girl. It was a fine day. He was planning to eat some of Hong’s cuisine, listen to her play the qin, and then seduce her with his charms.

These cheesy thoughts were in his mind, in contrast to the usual killing scenes, all because of a girl who wasn’t even pretty.

That is, until after taking a sip of Pingting’s soup. His smile had instantly dropped, disappearing completely.

Pingting eagerly studied his reaction.

“My Master never eats anything I make.”

Chu Beijie’s expression was extremely odd when he nodded. “Your master is very clever, isn’t he?” He hesitated before saying honestly, “This soup is disgusting.”

Pingting had actually been very worried but seeing his usually-composed, handsome face so distorted was amusing enough to make her smile, dimples showing.

Chu Beijie sighed, “Now I really know why they say those who know the best recipes can’t always cook well.”

Pingting nodded in agreement, “Likewise. Those who know battle tactics can’t always fight in a war themselves.”

Her comment really suited Chu Beijie’s style. He slapped his hand down on his knee in response, chuckling. “Well said! Well said!” He laughed again but suddenly stopped and stared at Pingting with wide eyes, “Have you fully recovered yet?”

His voice was husky, full of affection. She could feel his ego again and nervously, she took a step back.

It would’ve been better if she hadn’t moved, for Chu Beijie moved even faster. He grabbed her hand and pulled her closer, hugging her waist.

“Kyaa!” Pingting gasped in surprise, as she was being pulled into his chest.

Lifting her head, she could see his black eyes watching her playfully.

Chu Beijie had one arm over her, so she couldn't move. He lowered his head and whispered in her ear, "Dangerous situation. How is My Lady going to counter it?"

His whisper gave her a shock, heart almost jumping out of her throat. She was a little scared, but for some reason, she also felt the impulse to smile. She frowned as she looked at him, "The victor will always decide the fate of the defeated, meaning that further annihilation is unnecessary?"

Chu Beijie wasn't convinced, and shook his head. "Where are the so-called-defeated, for I haven't heard any song of defeat yet?"

His mouth was very close to Pingting's neck and she could feel his breath. Unnerved, she seemed to shrink in his arms. In a delicate and charming voice, she asked, "Since ancient times, there have only been songs of victory. Since when were there songs of defeat as well?"

"You can sing the first and from thereon, it'll exist." Chu Beijie smiled threateningly, "If you don't sing, don't blame me if I annihilate you." He moved in to kiss her.

"Don't..." Pingting felt helpless because this person was just too cunning. She could only glare accusingly at him.

Chu Beijie was temporarily stunned by her glare, but he wanted to kiss her so badly, so he continued to inch closer. That was when Pingting started to sing softly.

"Swallows bring fortune, but too much fortune brings damage. A joy to look, a joy to look..."

As expected, Pingting's voice was touching and Chu Beijie had closed his eyes, listening in appreciation. He only started to open his eyes several seconds after the song had finished. "From now on, you must never sing in front of others, as you evoke too much emotion and will end up breaking their hearts." He sighed twice, his happy expression turning serious. "You are too special to be just a maid from Hua Residence. Who are you really?"

This struck her like lightning. She accompanied her master several times onto

battle, was a fair, honest military advisor, and knew battle tactics like the back of her hand. She had even indirectly fought against the famous Duke of Zhen-Bei, this very person in front of her, several times before.

Chu Beijie saw her pale face, feeling love and affection for her. Patting the hair on her forehead, he whispered, "Don't be scared, just tell me the truth. I'll definitely protect you. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Pingting gave a bitter smile.

If Chu Beijie knew that she was Gui Le's Jing-An Ducal Residence's Bai Pingting, he'd know that she was the one threatened to drown his Zhen-Bei's army. There was no possibility that he'd protect her if he knew that she knew all sorts of secrets about the House of Jing-An.

The consequences were unthinkable.

"Tell me." He stared intently into those black pupils, "I'll help you, whoever you are."

"I..."

"Tell me."

Pingting's eyes flickered towards Chu Beijie's eyes, which were supportive. She took a deep breath, "I was raised as a qin maid in the Prince, now King's residence in Gui Le."

Chu Beijie was stunned.

"Hong's real name is Yangfeng and I was brought into the Prince's Residence as a child. However, Prince Su really liked me and so I was taught to play qin so that I could entertain him when he drank wine in the gardens."

"Yangfeng?" Chu Beijie was a little curious, "Then how did you end up in the Hua Residence?"

Pingting lowered her eyes, sighing. "To be honest, I started to get really popular with my Master. Some people in Gui Le started to get threatened by my influence. I was stupid and naïve. Somehow, I got into deep trouble. I was supposed to die, but two of my friends helped me escaped, only to meet some human traffickers. That's how I ended up in Dong Lin and then... I met the

Duke.” She shrugged and gave a forced laugh, “A series of coincidences.”

Chu Beijie studied her. “I was right. You really are from a royal residence.” He knew all about the royal residential life and naturally, he was sympathetic. “Don’t worry, I bet not even the Queen of Gui Le, but He Su himself can do anything about you.”

For some reason, the tips of Pingting’s ears went slightly red. Seeing how Chu Beijie was being so kind, she hurriedly lowered her head and bowed, “Thank you, Duke.”

Chu Beijie smiled, “You can get up now.” He helped her up, particularly paying attention to her hands. “These are good qin hands.” He was tightly holding on to them now and probably wasn’t going to let go.

Pingting wanted to hide, but she couldn’t. It was like Chu Beijie was controlling her heart. She pretended to wipe her hands, but that didn’t work either. “Duke...” but she was answered with a teasing smile. Her thoughts were a mess.

Chu Beijie released his hold when he had finally had enough of seeing her blush. “I heard you sing, but now I want to hear you play qin. Hong, no Yangfeng, play something for me.”

Pingting nodded and looking in the direction that Chu Beijie had been pointing at, she saw a guqin on the table. When she sat down, she couldn’t help noticing that it was the Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin.

The music began again.....

It was like the first time one had seen the Alps, the pine branches decorated with snow and the fierce wind billowing in the background. A scene of sorrow.

Slowly, the wind died away and the snow came again. Though it was still cold, there was more life in it. The snow had yet to stop but some small animals had already come out in search for food. They scurried up the trees and picked some berries. Then they paused, as if they were hearing something. They had disappeared before one even realised it.

The mountains were quiet.

Soon, joyful laughter was heard, far away. Around four children had come to have a snow fight and suddenly, there were balls of snow flying all over the place. They were half-yelling, half-laughing, messing around but either way, they were having fun.

The qin sound came to a joyous end.

Chu Beijie was comfortably leaning on his chair and opening his eyes he said, "Nice but why isn't there a reverberation?"

"There's no set way to interpreting music, so why isn't stopping at the happiest moment acceptable?" She bit her lip.

Their eyes met and they were wondering why their hearts were beating so fast. Finally, Chu Beijie cleared his throat, clapped twice while ordering, "Yangfeng, come here."

Pingting stood up from the guqin, slowly shuffled closer to him. There was about a table's distance between them when she mischievously asked, "Does Duke still plan to drink my soup?"

Thinking of the disgusting soup, Chu Beijie had to shake his head vigorously.

"Then... I'll take it out."

She took the plates, backing rapidly out of the room.

Chu Beijie watched her disappear in bewilderment. Then he clapped quietly.

Chu Moran appeared in the doorway.

"Duke."

"There's a qin maid in Gui Le, who goes by the name Yangfeng." Chu Beijie shrugged, "Research her."

"Yes, I will begin immediately."

Pingting had begun to settle down in the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence. It wasn't hard serving Chu Beijie – it was much like her Jing-An Ducal Residence days. She didn't have to prepare any tea or do any hard work. All she had to do was to play qin and listen to him.

Everyone in the residence knew that she was special to Chu Beijie, and no one

dared to treat her badly. Everyone called her, 'Miss Yangfeng'.

Summer was not yet over when the water lilies began to bloom. One day, the two were talking after lunch.

"How big is this world?"

"I should be asking Duke instead. How should I know?" Pingting tilted her head, slightly rolling her eyes. "Don't tell me Duke wants to know, so Duke can command the soldiers to conquer all of it?"

Chu Beijie laughed, "Why not?"

Pingting raised an eyebrow, "I don't believe the rest of the world will give up so easily. There are four countries. Dong Lin has Duke of course, but the other three... well, even the Marquess of Jing-An in Gui Le isn't that easy to be taken down.

"He Xia?" Chu Beijie hummed, face breaking into a mysterious smile.

"Oh yeah, back then, what did you mean by saying that I might be able to see the Marquess soon?" Pingting pretended to recall, "I saw him from behind the blinds once back in the Prince's Residence. He looked heroic and I had a pretty good impression of him. An outstanding person, I'd say." Before she even realised it, Chu Beijie had his arms over her again.

"Good impression? An outstanding person?" Chu Beijie's voice was dangerous.

Pingting however, laughed at this. "Are you jealous, Duke?" Seeing that Chu Beijie was indeed jealous, she quietly added "Duke, please don't be stingy. Besides, I heard that he was targeted by the Gui Le King. Maybe he's already dead."

Chu Beijie laughed darkly while shaking his head, "If he dies so easily, he wouldn't be He Xia anymore."

Pingting's heart began to race because she had been waiting for this chance for a long time. "In other words, Duke knows where he is?" She couldn't control her excitement.

"He Xia escaped from the Gui Le city grounds and Gui Le is currently being

monitored by the soldiers. Sigh, I almost caught him a couple of days ago.” Sensing her body shake, he asked, “Yangfeng, are you okay?”

“No, no.” Pingting shook her head, her face very pale. To seem less suspicious, she raised an eyebrow. “Last time, it was Osmanthus. This time, it’s Chinese roses. What’s next?”

“Eh?”

Pingting met his eyes, “Duke keeps using different fragrances.” She pretended to be annoyed.

All traces of his suspicion were gone. Laughing, he said “Why be annoyed, since it’s hard to get certain flowers sometimes? When I choose my Duchess, I won’t look for someone pretty, just for someone who can accompany me to battle.”

“Duke, you haven’t finished with He Xia’s story.”

“What’s there to say? I ordered my spies to report the moment he arrived in Dong Lin, but somehow he managed to know what we were planning. He dodged my ambush and even killed my spy. He’s back in Gui Le somewhere now. That was all for nothing.”

Pingting quietly sighed in relief.

She knew that He Xia was safe and it was time to leave.

Actually, she should’ve left ages ago. She would often ask Chu Beijie whether she could walk around the residence. He ordered someone to follow her from afar on the first couple of times, but after that, he let her walk by herself.

She didn’t have any money for the journey, but the three bracelets Chu Beijie had given her were more than enough.

The route was roughly planned too.

She thoroughly thought things through, but she couldn’t decide when to leave.

Ten days later, autumn came. The leaves were yellower day by day, and they would fall down sooner or later.

It was time to go, but she couldn't bring herself to leave.

Chu Beijie was used to her playing the qin every day. She would sing, and he'd close his eyes, often smiling in delight.

Those smiles were imprinted in Pingting's mind. They were so sweet.

She was used to playing qin and singing for him. She knew that something big had happened on the days that Chu Beijie didn't visit her. Either something unfortunate had happened in the residence or an official had done something wrong. Of course, there were other reasons too.

Like the previous day, Chu Beijie wouldn't let her play qin. "Did you really cough last night? Don't pretend. How could I not know everything that happens in my residence? It's not like I can't afford a doctor, so why didn't you tell me?"

Pingting wasn't there at dinner last night, but little did she know that Chu Moran wasn't there either. He had spent the night making preparations to move Pingting into a better room and making an appointment with Chen Guangzhi.

"Why?" She stared out the window, where the leaves were caught in the wind. "We could be enemies in a way. You bully me, but then you're nice to me. Sometimes you say some pretty harsh things and rarely say something kind. Other times, you act like a real gentleman, but then again, you act like a spoilt Duke." She sighed, "Such an incomprehensible figure. Whoever's with him just suffers."

A maid asked her to visit Chu Beijie. The moment Pingting entered the room, Chu Beijie said, "You'll definitely love the menu today."

Sure enough, there was a selection of delicacies. Among them, there was steamed eggplant and 'eight treasure pickles', all famous cuisines.

"You don't eat much these days. You have to eat a little more today. You see, I got a Gui Le chef to make these." Chu Beijie watched her eagerly as he beckoned her to eat.

Pingting tasted it and the eggplant flavour melted in her mouth. Then she tried the eight treasure pickles but she chuckled straight away, "Duke knows even less than me about cuisine. You got a Gui Le chef, but not all of these

dishes are from Gui Le. For example, this eight treasure pickles are a famous Bei Mo dish, so why is it here?"

Chu Beijie sighed, "I see. I'll get someone else to cook for you then."

But Pingting shook her head instead and pointing at the eight treasure pickles dish, she said, "I love these. Duke doesn't know that I'm from Bei Mo after all."

"Eh?"

"Yeah, but I was sold into Gui Le at a young age. This is my favourite dish." She placed a piece of it in Chu Beijie's bowl. "Duke, why don't you taste some?"

The candlelight shone prettily on her cheeks and Chu Beijie couldn't help getting closer to her.

"I want to taste you," were his words.

Pingting's heart almost stopped.

He was too close and tightly holding onto her. It was hard to move. She turned her head and bit down on his ear.

"OW!" His chopsticks fell onto the floor with a clang.

"Duke... no..."

"What 'no'?" Chu Beijie asked in a hurt voice while stroking his ear, "I chose you way back then, and I refuse to let you run away. I'm going to take you with me on the battlefield in the future."

Her lips were a tight line but her eyes were like fire, ready to burn anything and everything.

"I want to marry you." He had let her catch her breath before he said this proposal.

"Duke?" Pingting looked at him bewilderedly. She was frowning, everything had happened all too fast and nothing seemed to fit with her original plan. Was I not acting ambiguously enough?

She was supposedly Yangfeng, a Gui Le's qin maid, an escaped maid.

He was the Duke of Zhen-Bei, and yet he wanted to marry her.

Chu Beijie looked unhappy, "You don't want to?"

Pingting widened her eyes, Chu Beijie was too close, and she felt very hot. He was very handsome. Everything about him was just strangely charming.

He had always been a proud, arrogant man.

"Marry me."

"Why?"

"Not only you can play qin and sing well, but you also have nimble hands and owns a heart of gold." Chu Beijie's smile was as dangerous as poisonous plants. "I'd much rather choose you over many other women."

"I..."

"Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other."

Pingting smiled sadly. His words were like warm water, warming her from within. Chu Beijie helped her stand.

"Never turn against each other?" Every word slowly tumbled out of her mouth.

Chu Beijie hugged her tightly, "Yes, from then on, you will be my Duchess and I will be your husband."

Remembering the Duke of Zhen-Bei on the battlefield, she took a step back.

"No..." She struggled to answer.

"Why not?"

"I am only... a qin maid."

"I like your qin."

"I'm not good enough for Duke."

"I'm good enough for you."

Yet she still shook her head and biting on her lip, she said "I... I'm not pretty enough."

Chu Beijie pretended to study her. "I think you're fine to look at." He grinned.

Pingting was silent. She rolled her black crystal eyes but she still had a slight heartache. Leave, tomorrow, I have to leave. This man's troops have attacked the place I was born, grew up, and is now sitting back and manipulating the King to hurt the people of my residence.

But Chu Beijie's embrace was always so warm, and it was hard to leave behind. Despite this, she still pushed him away and even said 'no' to him.

Her thumping heart began to calm down. Her complete rational self hadn't returned yet, so her thoughts were mainly illogical. She had to go. She had to leave, but she needed something that wouldn't make her look back.

The word 'unfulfilled' flashed into her mind several times.

"Duke," she mumbled quietly but then she lifted her head and said, "I don't want to be your duchess, but I..."

She bit down on her lip and remained quiet. Chu Beijie smiled kindly at her, "Continue."

"No, don't bother." It was like she had heard a touching song and Pingting could barely hold back her tears. She took a deep breath, suddenly hugged Chu Beijie hard and as she slowly looking up, she said "It's destiny that we were to meet, so may we just unite this one time?"

It was difficult for her to ask, but she would finally get what she wanted.

Thoughts of her country were at the back of her mind. Tomorrow would be another story.

She simply didn't care anymore. Tonight was hers.

And she was his.

Chu Beijie thought he had misheard her and he looked really confused until understanding flooded into his eyes. He laughed. Then, lifting her up, he briskly walked to his bedroom where he placed her down gently on his bed.

Head looking down, he studied her white, elegant hand.

"Let's be together forever."

"Yeah." Pingting nodded, a tear sliding down her cheek.

Underneath her clothes, she was one real flower. Seeing her made something snap inside his mind and he gazed at her.

“Beautiful...” He touched her with his mouth, inhaling her scent. She smelled of sweet flowers.

“Duke...”

“Not Duke.”

She sighed, “Beijie.”

“Back then I was Dingnan, now I’m Beijie.” He noticed that she was a little nervous.

Outside, a full moon was shining.

That night, in the quiet Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, the two people, respectively from Gui Le and Dong Lin laid together. One losing soul, the other losing heart.

Her sleeping face was serene in the moonlight. Pingting was smiling in her dreams and her breathing was quiet, regular.

She was tired. He could tell back then from her blurry eyes, like the stars were too bright for her.

Her perfect lips, slim waist and her long thin legs were all imprinted in his mind. Chu Beijie’s expression was of happiness, but then for some reason, his smile disappeared. He was frowning.

He walked out of the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him.

Chu Moran was waiting for him in the office.

Chu Beijie walked inside with heavy steps and he sat down expressionless. Chu Moran handed him a sheet of paper.

—Yangfeng, from Bei Mo, sold into Gui Le at will. Plays qin, is one of the two famous Gui Le qin players.

Favoured by He Su but rarely appears in public.

Loves flowers and plants.

Favourite food: Eight treasure pickles.

Favourite colour: Blue

Never been seen since accused of a crime.

He took out a sheet of paper and looked at it again.

It felt as if the temperature had just dropped several degrees. Chu Moran felt rather uncomfortable.

“Nothing suspicious at all,” Chu Beijie laughed bitterly.

He had rarely seen his master look so helpless and Chu Moran couldn't help lowering his head and saying, “Duke, could it be that...”

“Two famous Gui Le's qin players...” Chu Beijie asked in a deep voice, “Who's the other one?”

“It's one of Jing-An Ducal Residence's maids, family name, Bai.”

Chu Beijie closed his eyes and when he opened them again, there was a new light in them. A single phrase left his mouth, “Research her.”

“Yes.”

Pingting only woke up when morning came.

Someone was kissing her shoulder.

Turning to the side, she saw a pair of intelligent black eyes and suddenly she remembered what happened last night. She hid her overheating face in the blankets.

“What's done is done. No need to hide.” Chu Beijie smiled fondly at her hair. Seeing that she was still hiding, he laughed and playfully bit her shoulder.

“Ow!” Pingting jerked upwards, only to be captured by the waiting Chu Beijie, who planted a fierce kiss on her red lips.

“Hehe, the world's most delicious breakfast.”

“You... you...”

“What? From now on you must call me ‘husband’.”

Pingting narrowed her eyes, clearly displeased. “Who had agreed to marry you?”

Chu Beijie clamped her hand in his and looking intently into her eyes, he said in a very serious voice, "Marry me. Don't ever leave me."

Pingting felt as if she had been stabbed. She just stared.

Chu Beijie was really serious, "Don't think about it. Come with me. I'm willing to follow you into hell and heaven."

Hell and heaven? She raised an eyebrow and stared questioningly at him.

So strong, such pride, such dark eyebrows... isn't he just the ideal guy for every girl?"

If he was by my side, my life would be a lot easier.

But she... but she had to go.

Tears began to brim in Pingting's eyes. She turned away, refusing to let her tears flow.

Chu Beijie put his rough hand on Pingting's cheek. "Hey, why are you crying?"

"I don't know why I'm crying." Pingting dried her tears and managed a wobbly smile.

The more she thought about it, the more it hurt, but she had already convinced herself that she needed to go.

What's the point of missing him? She had to let go of Chu Beijie's laughter, hurt, anger, and happiness. Master is in danger. I can't just become a duchess for no reason.

Go, she had to go.

It was supposedly an auspicious year anyway.

She carefully studied Chu Beijie whenever she could. Being hugged by him always resulted in a sleepless night. However, the weather was bad in every way possible, and she could not fall asleep without clutching onto his warm hand first.

Sometimes, Chu Beijie's deep sigh would pass by her ear and her heart would hurt.

She often wondered how he could possibly be so wild.

Politics, campaigns and blood battles. He even refused to rest in his dreams.

Had to go, she had to go. She had fallen into a life-claiming quicksand pit. It was difficult to move out of it, but she had to.

“October’s Osmanthus fragrance fills thy head...”

The sweet aroma filled her lungs and she glanced back. Though her heart was cold, she remembered Chu Beijie’s sweet smile.

Chu Beijie had whispered to her, “When spring comes, all the flowers here will be in full bloom. When that time comes, I’ll personally pick a flower for you every day.”

“I’m not beautiful, so wouldn’t I be shadowed by a pretty flower?”

“Fine. You can sing. Sing until the flower withers.”

The sound of Chu Beijie’s laughter filled the empty courtyard.

In her heart, Pingting wept with sadness.

When spring comes, when all the flowers here will be in full bloom, you will be in Dong Lin and where will I be?

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 9

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch09

For the next twenty or so days, Chu Beijie refused to leave her side, as if worried about losing her. He watched her like a hawk, like a hungry person in front of food.

Pingting's heart melted like ice against the summer heat.

"Where's Moran these days?"

"I got him to do something, he only came back yesterday."

"What was so important that you actually had to send him away?"

Chu Beijie saw the raised eyebrow on her face and sighed. "The most important thing in this world is that you stay with me."

Pingting rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose, "Flattery."

"You aren't wrong, my mouth is flattering. Duchess, try it." He took the opportunity and kissed her, only letting go when he heard a faint "nnnn" from her. He broke away, put on a serious look and said, "Let's go back inside."

"No!" Pingting clenched her fists and hammered them against his back. "You pervert, I am not going back."

Another squeal and she'd already been picked up by Chu Beijie.

"Geez, not again...give me a break."

Chu Beijie laughed, "You can take a break later."

It was already the season of floating snowflakes, yet Pingting had still not found a good time to leave the Ducal Residence. She had almost torn her handkerchief, from worrying about it.

Today was supposed to be the best day, as Chu Beijie would be away all day, but he just had to tell Chu Moran, “Look after my future Duchess until I get back.”

Pingting was determined this time to not let such a great opportunity to slip away. She stood outside the door for a long time, watching him ride his horse away from her, as it would be the last time she’d ever see him.

Chu Moran approached her and stopped respectfully at a distance. “Miss Yangfeng, its cold, please come inside.”

As Chu Beijie’s figure disappeared from sight, Pingting gathered her thoughts. She turned around, lips playing into a smile. “I suppose it’ll snow tomorrow.” She stepped back inside the main gates and she could see Chu Moran standing rigidly behind her.

“Moran, you should do your other work.”

“Duke ordered to protect Miss Yangfeng today.”

Pingting’s face was as cold as stone. “You’re monitoring me?”

“Wouldn’t dare to.”

“I want to go outside. Are you going to tie me up and report to Duke?”

“Wouldn’t dare to.” As expected of Moran, his voice was level and his face ever expressionless.

Pingting lowered her head, pensive. She started to chuckle, “I guess that was wrong of me. I’m not in a very good mood right now because Duke isn’t here and started to vent my frustration on you.”

Moran’s face studied her. Her face was gentle.

Sleeping gas or sleeping pills? Pingting quietly calculated as she walked inside.

Unfortunately, she had neither at her disposal. The contents of sleeping gas were hard to get and there were too many ways of making sleeping pills. There was a relatively easy recipe, but she would require certain common herb for that one.

She, who used to hate the time when she had to learn these things with her

Master had now found the information to be quite useful..

Sleeping pills it is then.

“Cough.....cough.....” She coughed two times.

Chu Moran took two careful steps towards her: “Is Miss Yangfeng feeling unwell? I’ll get Chen Guanzhi...”

“No need, the herbs he prescribes never work, even when I have a lot, I don’t recover fast enough.” Pingting pretended to frown, “I’m sure my own prescription will be much better than his.” She sat down at a table and wrote a list, then handed it to Moran, “Here. Buy these for me.”

Pingting calmly watched Chu Moran scanned the list.

He couldn’t find anything suspicious and consented. He turned to the nearest guard and had him fetch the ingredients for the medicine on the list Pingting had written.

Not seeing anything suspicious, Chu Moran nodded approvingly “Alrigt”. He handed the list to a guard, “Go, and getthe herbs on this list.”

Pingting smiled before retreating into her room, and closed the door behind her.

Chu Moran stood outside the door.

The room was gorgeous, Chu Beijie had personally designed and selected each piece inside himself. Bronze mirrors glowed and beautiful carvings adorned the room. On an exquisite dressing table that was placed in the corner there were three strands of jet black hair on it. These had fallen off while Chu Beijie washed her hair today.

Pingting felt a wave of nostalgia rushed through her and sighed. She ambled to the dressing table and opened the jewellery box.

Every woman’s lifetime desires could be found within that box: gold hairpins, jade rings and brooches and an exquisite pearl necklace.

She picked a three unremarkable ones out of the lot and proceeded to hide them up her sleeve.

Everything was now ready. As soon as the sleeping pills were made, she would use them on Moran and after that, everything would be much easier.

She took a deep breath, pushing all of her desires to the back of her mind.

The bodyguard had already been taking a long time and almost two hours had already passed by. Pingting didn't want to ask Chu Moran since she did not want him to have any suspicious at this critical time. She decided to start coughing again. Outside, Chu Moran listened to her 'sickness' and only then, did he feel obliged to ask "Why haven't the herbs here already?" to one of the other guards beside him. It was in that moment, when someone suddenly came in.

"What's wrong, you feeling unwell again?" Chu Beijie strode towards her. "It's cold today, so don't just sit there," he murmured.

"Why're you back so soon?" Pingting was surprised, she hadn't expected to see Chu Beijie beside her today, "Have you finished your work yet?"

"Not yet, but Moran said you were sick and coughing really hard, so he told someone to fetch me."

Pingting instantly began to detest Chu Moran. She bit down on her lip, he had ruined her chance to escape. She brightened, "I'm fine. Moran was over-exaggerating; you don't need to worry about me. You should go back to your work. You're a Duke, so don't spend your time with a woman all day." She gently pushed him away.

"Haha, finally you're acting like a duchess." Chu Beijie let go of her and said, "It's nothing important though. I just caught someone close to He Xia and I was in the middle of questioning him when I heard that you were sick, so I came here."

Pingting's body jolted at the mention of her companions but she hid it by pretending to cough.

Chu Beijie patted her on the back, "What's wrong? You said that you were fine, but I reckon we have yet to cure the root of your disease. I've ordered them to find the best medicine already."

Pingting stopped coughing, looked up and asked, "What about you? If you don't question the prisoner, how are you supposed to report to the King?"

“I’ve already asked some people to bring him here. I can question him within my own residence.”

“Who is this very important person?”

“He isn’t that important, just a brat called Dongzhuo.”

Pingting registered the figures in her head, face expressionless. “I’ve heard of his name before, he’s one of the Marquess of Jing-An’s favourite attendants. He once accompanied the Marquess of Jing-An when he visited the Prince’s Residence.”

Chu Beijie stroked her hair, “Do you want to accompany me?”

The trial was to be held in a dungeon.

Fire blazed as bright as day and it illuminated the odd shapes of the various instruments of torture. The walls and ceilings were dyed black with blood.

Pingting never have been there before, so she closely followed Chu Beijie while at the same time studied her surroundings.

The sturdy prison walls were certainly not going to be easy to escape from, she secretly noted to herself.

Chu Beijie’s breath was warm in her ear as he whispered, “If you start to feel afraid or nervous, don’t forget to hold me tight.”

Pingting nodded her head feeling pathetic and Chu Beijie burst into laughter.

At the end of the long, stone corridor, the fire suddenly lit up the wall. A teenage boy was hanging in the air, his arms and legs shackled by heavy chains. His head was down.

Pingting looked at him and instantly knew that he really was Dongzhuo. His clothes were tattered but he hadn’t many scars. She quickly came to realise that he hadn’t been tortured yet.

“Brat, wake up! Our Duke is here,” said the person who was in charge of the prisoners, as he nudged him with a whip. He raised Dongzhuo’s chin to look at Chu Beijie.

There was an invisible, but frosty glow in Dongzhuo’s eyes as he stared at Chu

Beijie. “Hmph, Chu Beijie.”

The House of Jing-An’s worst enemy was standing right in front of him.

“I don’t plan to harm you. I am simply an admirer of the Marquess of Jing-An and I would like to persuade him to ally Dong Lin.” Chu Beijie smiled again, very sincerely, “After all, the Marquess of Jing-An can no longer go back to Gui Le, so isn’t it a good idea for him to find new loyalties?”

“Whatever you say, I won’t tell you anything,” was Dongzhuo’s cold reply.

Chu Beijie shook his head and with a sympathetic-looking face, he said, “I admire tough boys, but unfortunately not many remain tough in my hands.” He took a step back and nodded at one of his subordinates.

Pingting, who had been hiding behind Chu Beijie, instantly knew that he was going to whip him. The sound of the whip pierced through the air.

Chaa!

The whip came in contact with flesh and Pingting shuddered at the sound.

Chaa! Chaa! Chaa!

More consecutive sounds of strong, powerful whipping could be heard. It was hard to breathe.

The sound of metal chains clinking in protest slowly decreased, minute by minute.

The whip severely hurt Dongzhuo, but he suffered in silence, not saying a word.

Chu Beijie blocked Pingting’s view, seemingly noticing that she was shaking. He gently patted her on the back. She looked up and saw his merciless expression.

“You’re still not going to tell me?” Chu Beijie was getting annoyed, “You know, the whip is the most common torture in prisons. And yet, this can only be counted as an appetiser because when I use the main dishes, you might even end up losing your life.”

With a hoarse voice, Dongzhuo calmly replied, “There isn’t a single person from the Jing-An Ducal Residence who is afraid to die!”

Chu Beijie chuckled at this and Pingting could almost hear his evil intentions from his chilling, dangerous smile. Things did not look good for Dongzhuo.

Then turning to Pingting, Chu Beijie softly assured her, "Why is your face so pale? Are you afraid? Do not fear, for I am here."

"There's a lot of blood," she replied timidly, flinching.

The chains suddenly thumped, as if Dongzhuo had realised something.

"Afraid of blood?" Chu Beijie shook his head and jokingly added, "If my wife is afraid of blood, how is she supposed to accompany me onto the battlefield?"

Pingting's delicate and pretty face weakly smiled at Chu Beijie. She could see Dongzhuo out of the corner of her eye, suspended in the air, covered in blood. Dongzhuo's eyes were wide with disbelief, but somehow he managed to understand her situation and so he hung his head instead.

"I feel uncomfortable." She touched Chu Beijie's forehead and leaned on him.

Such feminism on her part was unusually rare for him to see. He was naturally overcome with sympathy and affection so he asked, "Where do you feel uncomfortable? I shouldn't have asked you to come with me."

Pingting ignored Dongzhuo. She looked into Chu Beijie's eyes. "It's stuffy in here, I want to cough, but I can't. Get someone to take me out, you deal with your work first."

"I'll come with you."

"Your work..."

"You're more important."

Before she could protest, he had already lifted her up again.

"Ah!" Pingting yelped in surprise and she blushed harder when she remembered that Dongzhuo was watching them. She buried her head in Chu Beijie's arms in shame.

The jailer stepped forward with a blood-stained whip in his hands. "Duke, that prisoner..."

"Guard him carefully, he's someone from the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Hmm,

I'll do the questioning myself tomorrow."

"Yes." The jailer had another thought, "Would you like more people to guard him?"

Chu Beijie snapped, "Is it possible that He Xia would try to break into my residence?"

"Yes yes, understood."

Chu Beijie took her away from the scene in his arms. Though Pingting was still hiding in his arms, her eyes were as wide as saucers. She studied and took mental notes on where each guard was standing, how many there were and memorised the route back.

The moment they entered her room, a warm feeling spread through them. It was much more welcoming than the dungeon air.

"Don't get cold", Chu Beijie tucked her into bed. He ordered someone to bring a cup of hot tea.

"I'm not thirsty," said Pingting, frowning.

The tough yet gentle aroma of hot tea watered into her lips.

He ordered light refreshments.

"Not hungry either."

She was still protesting, but then she had already eaten all of the refreshments.

After refreshments, it was Chu Beijie's turn to eat 'dessert'.

"Hey...you...can't be serious...."

"I'm never serious around you." He kissed her, his tongue coming in, like a wind sweeping through her teeth. She struggled, but he was too strong as she began to lose control of herself.

Finally, she managed to kick away, her bright eyes pleading. "I...ahh, um... cough cough." She refused to meet Chu Beijie's commands and the only way she could get away with it was by coughing.

Chu Beijie was surprised and he hurriedly took a step back, "You're really sick?"

I know you're afraid of blood, but soon, you'll get used to it." Then, he raised his voice, "Someone! Get Chen Guanzhi to come here!"

Pingting tugged at his sleeve, "No need. Having plenty of rest will do the trick. Besides, I don't like Chen Guanzhi's prescriptions. They're simply too bitter."

"Bitter medicine is good medicine." Chu Beijie looked back at her, his face charming. "If you really don't like him, I'll find you another doctor."

"Why find another? I already gave Moran the prescription I made today..."

They suddenly heard something outside the room.

"Duke, the King has summoned you."

Chu Beijie touched Pingting's hand, "Why in the middle of the night?"

Chu Moran's reply was curt. "The group that we sent to Bei Mo seems to be in trouble..."

Chu Beijie groaned in dismay. Pingting, who had been waiting for him to leave, eagerly pushed his shoulders. "Your work is important, don't make the King worry."

"Then...you must stay here, I'll get them to boil the herbs."

"Don't stall, I'll ask them. Go."

Chu Beijie's face was one of guilt. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Okay."

She watched Chu Beijie disappear, feeling a rush of excitement as she jumped out of bed.

She patiently listened for movement, took a deep breath before going to the window. Her alert eyes scanned the situation outside, through a small gap.

Chu Moran seemed to have gone with Chu Beijie, as he was no longer standing outside her door.

Her lips broke into a sly smile, as she turned around to grind the selection of herbs on the table.

"Unique remedies and sleeping gas." She said to herself, "There aren't many

guards in the dungeon, so this should be more than enough.”

She took out a box underneath her bed. There was a sleeping gas bomb inside it.

“If he knew, I don’t know what he’ll do to me.” Her heart ached slightly and Pingting’s face had a touch of resentment. She sighed, “oh well, it doesn’t matter if I’m afraid of him...”

She pushed away those thoughts. “Don’t think about it, I have to help Master and Dongzhuo.”

Although she’d already finished planning ages ago, it took around fifteen minutes for her to get ready.

Pingting looked outside. Chu Moran hadn’t come back yet. Armed with a sleeping gas bomb, she quietly left the room.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 10

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch10

The insects had long gone into hibernation for it already was a winter's night. A curved moon hung in the sky, emitting a cold, pale light.

She huffed while walking towards the underground dungeon.

Due to her keen observation for the last few days, she noticed that breaking through the security was relatively easy. While Pingting walked, she saw a couple of maids, who waved and then scurried off.

Around the artificial mountain and bamboo she went, arriving at the entrance of the underground dungeon.

The warden had seen someone approaching in the distance but he was surprised to see that it was Pingting. He greeted her with a smile.

"Why has Miss Yangfeng decide to pay us a visit? Wow, it sure is cold today."

"I lost a hairpin, just have to look for it"

"A hairpin?" The warden hesitated, "Couldn't you have left it in your room?"

"I've looked, but it's not in there. I think it's more likely that I lost it in the dungeon." Pingting lowered her voice, "I only got it from Duke this morning and I've only used it once. How am I supposed to explain to Duke tomorrow morning? Please, please help me look for it"

"That's..." The warden looked undecided. "This dungeon is an important place, it is usually prohibited to enter."

"Didn't I go in this morning?"

The warden's mouth tightened into a thin line but he pretended to be cheerful. "Miss, aren't you bending my values here? If Duke asks..."

Pingting took her argument no further, instead pretended to be elegant. "Then could you please go in and have a look for me? Look carefully on the ground and on the stage. I'll wait here." She immediately started coughing, pretending to be sick from the cold.

The north wind was piercing. Even the warden had been cold, but now hearing Pingting's cough unnerved him. "Miss, please go back. When I find it, I shall personally deliver it to you."

"No, no, waiting is better. Cough, cough, cough...cough...I...cough...my chest feels humid, my forehead feels like it's on fire, but I don't feel cold."

Her words made a startling impact on the dungeon keeper.

The dungeon keeper knew that the Duke adored this girl. For her sickness, he had chosen the famous doctor, Chen Guangzhi, to look after her. It was very likely that she would be his future, official wife, their Duchess. If she got sick outside his dungeon, then...

After weighing his options, the dungeon head said, through gritted teeth, "On other thoughts, you can come in. It's slightly warmer in there. It'll be more convincing if you look for it yourself too, Miss."

He opened the big dungeon door, let Pingting in and gingerly closed the door behind her.

At the other end of the once pitch-black room, there lay Dongzhuo.

He didn't feel cold. The dried blood that covered his body felt like a thousand infernos. It clung to his body, even the slightest movement could tear open his wounds.

He rested against the wall, trying to save as much strength as possible.

Creak...

The sound of the dungeon door carefully being opened broke the silence. A ray of light entered.

Dongzhuo's eyes flickered in response.

“Dongzhuo?” Pingting appeared at the door, holding a flaming torch.

Dongzhuo’s mouth twitched into a smile, forcing a hint of his usual mischievous demeanour. “I was waiting for you.”

He stood up, his wounds on his legs threatened to give in.

Pingting’s face flashed towards him, smiling, and the chains rattled.

After his binds had been taken off, Dongzhuo asked, “What happened to the people outside?”

“Down.” Pingting rolled her crystal black eyes. “I didn’t even use the sleeping gas bomb.”

“You mean the formula that almost forced the entire Residence of Jing-An to sleep?”

Pingting lifted the corners of her mouth smugly. “Follow me.”

They left the dungeon, the warden and his three guards lay on the ground outside. Both of them had been to too many wars and they efficiently changed into the residential guards’ clothes without a word. Pingting knew the place too well and led the way to the stables.

The sky had yet to brighten and the stable boy was still fast asleep.

Dongzhuo chose two of the best horses. One for Pingting, the other for himself.

“Looks like Chu Beijie isn’t back yet, thank God.” Pingting looked up at the sky. “At this time, Mr Zhang will be guarding the back door. He isn’t very strong, so go easy on him.”

After they had knocked out Mr Zhang, out the little back door they went. Just like that, they had escaped from the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, without too much trouble.

They smiled at each other, no need for celebration.

Besides, the further they went, the safer.

Soon, they had left the city walls, galloping past the fields of yellow grass and nectarine trees.

Thinking that they had already left the danger behind, they slowed down a little.

Both of them were tired, so they chose a spot and sat down to have a rest.

Dongzhuo lowered his head, deep in thought. He couldn't help but ask, "It might be better to ask this question in the future, but... Pingting, how did you end up in Chu Beijie's residence?"

The smile on Pingting's face faltered for a second, but it was quickly replaced by the normal expression. "Come closer. Let me tell you."

Dongzhuo leaned closer to her and Pingting whispered into his ear. What he heard made his face change and after she had finished, she jerked his head upwards to stare at Pingting.

Pingting kept her face neutral, "What?"

"So that's the story..."

"Anyways, back to the point." Pingting said, "The residence lost a criminal. Chu Beijie will definitely send soldiers to pursue us. One of us needs to divert the soldiers' attention, the other needs to go back to Master."

"Pingting, I think we should give up."

Her face went cold, "How can we possibly just give up now? I'll go east and you go west. Go."

He didn't reply, so Pingting pushed him onto a horse and whipped it. She watched the horse slowly disappear into the distance.

"Pingting can finally see you again, Master." She checked that Dongzhuo really had disappeared, before heading to her destination.

Pingting had been right, it was going to snow soon. In the early morning, the sun briefly showed its face before darting back into the clouds and very soon, grey clouds began to cover the sky.

Pingting, who was still on horse, knew that the clouds overhead were gathering.

"Ah, that's a big snowflake." She reached out, picking out a snowflake in

midair. She watched it melt on her frozen, red hand and this brought a child-like smile onto her face.

She hadn't seen such good snow for a long time.

For the last couple of years, her master always called out to her around this time. "Hurry! Time to admire the snow, don't forget the qin, remember to bring the qin."

Though Master is in hiding, he should be happy with this snow too, right?

She wasn't riding that fast, but was casually appreciating the spiralling white scenery. She'd already taken off the white fox coat off the horse and had draped it over herself.

Chu Beijie had given her that coat recently. It seemed that it was a specialty of Dong Lin. It really was nice to wear, for it seemed that not the slightest bit of wind could penetrate through. As she had expected there to be snow, she had come well-prepared.

"When there is trouble, there are heroes; when there are heroes, there are beautiful women; surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil..."

Though it was cold, Pingting was in a good mood and amidst the beautiful scenery, she had begun to sing.

Her mind was occupied and despite the smile on her face, there was an unmistakable trace of confusion.

But her voice was as gentle as ever.

"If there are soldiers, there will be fame; if there is fame, there will be fraud; soldiers know fraud, soldiers know fraud..."

She suddenly thought of Chu Beijie.

Her face suddenly went red, as if she had just brushed blusher on her cheeks.

That person, that man. Pingting stopped singing, softly sighing. No word could even describe him.

It snowed heavily for the next three days, while she continued to ride East.

Three days later, the snow stopped. She had already reached the outskirts of

Dong Lin. She stopped at a place exactly a day away from Gui Le.

The earth was white.

Pingting stopped and asked a passer-by for the first time.

“Excuse me Sir, do you know where Three-Swallow Cliff is?”

“Straight ahead. Can you see that strip of land where those sheep are grazing on? Go through there and at the fork, go right. You’ll get there in about half a day by horse.” The old man was holding preserved foods for the winter. He looked up, “It’s so cold, yet you still have to go?”

“Yep!” She thanked the old man, then mumbled, “Sheep on a strip of land...”

It was right ahead.

She thought of her master’s smile and wondered how he would react when he saw her.

She couldn’t suppress the joy in her heart; she pushed the horse to go a little faster.

Arriving at the thin strip of grass, she saw that her path was a valley wide enough for three horses to pass through simultaneously, but the sky up ahead was still a relatively thin gap.

Grey-white light shone through the gap.

Pingting stopped at the entrance.

The wind that came from the valley was bitter, bone-piercingly cold. The cold matched the sound of crunching gravel.

The air was like a morbid omen.

“Pursuers...” Pingting’s delicate mouth sighed, as if to feel the danger. Pingting suddenly jerked her horse and whipped it, hard.

“Go!”

The little black horse seemed to have also felt the danger. It reared up, before bounding into the valley.

Then came their eerie predators.

They could hear the rumbling of hooves behind them. Figures suddenly appeared, like demons arising from the earth.

Pursuing soldiers, pursuing soldiers!

The Duke of Zhen-Bei's soldiers were here!

It was like they were trying to overpower the white earth.

They were getting closer and closer, it was almost deafening. It was difficult not to imagine that murderous intent in the air, with soldiers and their swords flashing in silver light.

Pingting didn't look back, just galloped forward.

Something roared within her, but it was immediately replaced by dismay.

"Yangfeng!" Came the rich voice, sweet to her ears.

Chu Beijie was here.

Her slender body trembled, but Pingting pretended not to hear, she continued to gallop forward.

Faster, faster! The wind whipped against her face, it hurts.

"Bai Pingting!" The same voice, except this time it was adorned with anger.

Pingting was shaking.

She knew this person's sweet voice very well.

He said that they will never be apart.

He said that when spring came, he would personally pick a flower for her every day.

But now he was angry, like the lions, who sought blood.

All she could picture was a battlefield. When a powerful army strikes to defeat an enemy, the blood thirsty cry like demons commanding a massacre.

The hooves seemed to get closer, as if they were right behind her.

She tried her best to speed up by using the whip again.

But before the whip had actually gone down, someone had already pulled the whip out of her hands and had wrapped his arms around her waist, as if trying

to prove some point.

“Ah!” She exclaimed as she fell into an embrace that smelled of gunpowder.

Opening her eyes, she saw a pair of very dangerous looking black pupils.

“You sure ran away far.” He used one hand to guide the horse, the other to hold his captive. Chu Beijie forced a smile, “Look at you, so disobedient, escaping this far.”

Despite knowing the danger, Pingting had to ask him something. “When did you realize I was Bai Pingting?”

“All right, not too late.” He peered down at her, as if calculating her.

Slender neck, white hands, delicate face.

Her eyes were too calm. She certainly didn’t know what real torture was, nor did she know how dangerous the angry Duke of Zhen-Bei was like.

How am I going to punish her?

“Where’s Dongzhuo?” she gave up struggling because she knew that it was impossible to escape from his arms.

“Ran away. Don’t worry, I’ll capture him soon and then you’ll be able to have a happy reunion.” Chu Beijie coldly replied, “Three-Swallow Cliff, was it?”

Pingting began to chuckle.

Chu Beijie sweetened his voice, “I’m more afraid of you crying though. Your tears totally break my heart.”

Pingting stopped laughing. “Duke must have pretty reliable sources.”

“That’s right.”

“You were suspicious of my identity from the start. You caught someone from the Jing-An Ducal Residence to test me”

“You could be right. If you let me kill that brat, then I wouldn’t have been suspicious of you anymore.”

“Duke pretended to go away on purpose, but you secretly followed us after I had rescued him. You did this to find Master’s location.”

Chu Beijie looked at her bemused. "An army has already gathered at Three-Swallow Cliff, so your stalling techniques are useless."

"Duke's embrace is always the warmest." Pingting seemed to have given up, she had closed her eyes and was obediently pressing into Chu Beijie. "If Duke is so strong, how come you didn't catch Dongzhuo?"

Pingting's voice must have made Chu Beijie think of something else, as he shouted, "Retreat! Retreat out of this place!"

Pingting smiled tenderly, "Too late."

Everyone's face looked dumb-stricken.

They had yet to understand, when they heard shouts overhead. They looked up, seeing many bows and arrows pointing at them from both sides.

With this many arrows, even the most skilled would have difficulty escaping.

"It's an ambush!"

"Ah! The people of the Jing-An Ducal Residence!"

"Damn it! Run! Ah...."

The crowd roared as many tried to escape with their horses, but the unforgiving arrows still penetrated right through their stomachs.

They kept screaming, as did people falling off their horse.

The horses neighed as the blood splattered everywhere.

The arrows only came for the ones who tried to escape. Some of the people on the cliff shouted, "Those who surrender will not be killed! Those who surrender will not be killed!"

It was pretty obvious that the victor had been decided already.

Chu Beijie knew that he had been too careless and this would leave a lasting stain on his profile. He raised his hand and shouted, "Stop moving. Everyone dismount and hold onto your horse."

He repeated his command twice more and his soldiers had calmed down. As expected, they dismounted and they had all gathered around him. His army wielded swords of all kinds, their blade flashing in the light.

He looked down and saw a pair of cunning eyes.

“So you deliberately chose a place to leave that brat, and those whisperings were actually your plan to trap me.”

“You flatter me, Duke. That place was quite difficult to find and making Dongzhuo disappear from your spies took me a lot of thought.”

Her slow journey through the snow was also a ploy to give Dongzhuo enough time to report back to her master. Fortunately she read a lot and had recently read about this valley on the outskirts of Dong Lin. It had helped with her planning.

Chu Beijie thought about what she said. “Unfortunately, you miscalculated one thing.”

“Oh?”

“If you hadn’t miscalculated, why did you end up in my hands?” After a while, he added, “If a thousand arrows head for me, although I won’t live for long, I doubt you would.”

Pingting raised an eyebrow and in a light voice she said, “I sold you. So does it matter whether I accompany you to death or not?”

Chu Beijie’s sharp eyes rested on her hair, threatening to pierce through her skull. “It was a rhetorical question, besides, I doubt you want to die.”

Pingting answered, “Duke is such a hero, so of course you wouldn’t like to die useless? Actually, I don’t exactly want Duke’s death, but you have to promise one thing. One thing and those bows and arrows will disappear, without hurting anyone.

“Speak.”

“It’s simple, for the next five years, Dong Lin’s soldiers cannot enter nor fight Gui Le.”

Chu Beijie lowered his voice, “Only the King can make decisions on battles.”

“Duke is the brother of the King and you are also the best general, so you must have some influence right? Gui Le gets five years of peace in exchange for Duke’s life, I think that’s fair.” She bit her lip and lowered her voice too, “If you

live, I live. If you die, I can only accompany you to death.”

Chu Beijie realized that he was holding onto a very cunning woman, yet his heart refused to give in.

Gentle, he could still remember her lingering touch.

She could be gentle, but underneath was immeasurable deception, trickery.

Chu Beijie gritted his teeth, the veins in his neck were emphasized.

He had never been manipulated by anyone.

This was an absolutely unforgivable insult.

Pingting didn't realise Chu Beijie's anger.

Her heart tangled up at the sight of Chu Beijie's face.

She could no longer tolerate his oppressive gaze, so she softly urged, “Duke, you must make your decision now.”

His thoughts were blank.

“Ha, ha, hahahaha!” Chu Beijie tossed his head back and laughed, his spectators wondering if he had gone crazy. He stared angrily at Pingting, his eyes full of hatred. “Do as you wish.”

Pulling out his most important sword that hung from his waist, he threw it towards the ground, the force strong enough to light a fire.

“I, Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie, swear on my royal blood that for the next five years, no Dong Lin soldier will set foot on Gui Le territory. I leave this sword to you, as a token of my promise.”

His resentful voice echoed in the valley, like a deep sorrowful lament at the end of time. His voice was clear and loud. As soon as Chu Beijie said this, a figure appeared at the top of the cliff, peering down but smiling. “The Duke of Zhen-Bei is a true gentleman. I, He Xia, believe you will keep your promise and on behalf of all those peasants who do not wish to fight, I would like to thank you.

There he was, the Marquess of Jing-An, graceful but not showy, wearing clothes as white as the snow. He was the very person that the King of Gui Le wanted to kill most at the moment.

Pingting saw her master and couldn't help but exclaim "Master!" in delight.

He Xia turned towards her and nodded. "Pingting, you did well, I....." his words were caught in his throat, as if it was too private to talk about. He turned to Chu Beijie, "Please let go of my maid. Now that the deal has been made, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, you may leave. We will not attack you."

Chu Beijie didn't say a word, just glanced down at Pingting.

Go back?

Letting go, he helped her off the horse. It was a simple action, but Chu Beijie could not stop himself from holding onto her tighter and tighter.

This extremely slim woman, who was as poisonous as snakes and scorpions and would manipulate him without a second thought. She should be his enemy, one that he should quickly kill.

Yet he was almost clutching onto her.

Don't want to... let go.

Her warm body, her slender fingertips and her delicate face was frozen from the cold.

His fingers brushed against her lips.

Like he used to.

He had gotten used to listening her play the qin, used to listening her joke about the weather, used to her lazing on the bed all night while he read his documents.

If only he had known her true origin, he could have prevented this from happening and live with her in peace.

His happiness only took him into a trap.

What he thought he had captured suddenly grew wings and flew away, back to her master.

Yet he could not stand the thought of letting her go.

He was used to holding her, hugging her, kissing her. Kissing her...

His hatred was extreme, his love thinning out.

He was used to.....

Between earth and heaven, this woman must be the most evil and the most hated person ever, yet between earth and heaven, she was also the softest, the gentlest.

And he struggled to catch this extraordinary woman.

Chu Beijie shut his eyes, thinking, preserving.

“Duke, please let go of my maid,” Came the faint voice of He Xia.

Chu Beijie seemed to fall the cloud of the past back into reality. He looked down, she was still there, staring at him with her bright eyes.

“Duke, please let me dismount,” she whispered.

Chu Beijie wasn’t sure that he heard her correctly.

Dismount? Where are you going?

You lied to me, why should I just let you go because you say so?

In this entire world, I only want you, only you.

My hatred is strong yet my love is deep. I want your body and mind; there is no escape.

Chu Beijie frostily replied, “I only promised Gui Le five years of peace, I did not promise to give you up.”

Pingting shook her head and said, “My country’s soldiers haven’t retreated yet. It’s not looking too good for you, Duke.”

“As expected of He Xia’s female military advisor.” Chu Beijie’s lips were drawn tight, but then he smiled, “What do you think will happen if I kill you here and now?”

Pingting wasn’t afraid at all, she sweetly laughed instead, “Pingting will die with Duke on the same day and at the same time.”

“Wrong.” Chu Beijie relaxed, before saying, “He Xia won’t allow anyone to shoot me. He will let me leave here safely, so long I promise to uphold my

promise of peace.”

Uncertainty flicked on Pingting’s face, though it was instantaneously back to normal. It however, did not escape Chu Beijie’s sharp eyes.

Chu Beijie exclaimed, “You are He Xia’s personal maid, yet you don’t know that he is a famous general? What is famous, you say; it is distinguishing what’s important and what’s not. The life of Bai Pingting is insignificant in comparison to five years of peace.”

Pingting hesitated for a while, before sadly saying, “Duke, do you really hate me that much?”

Chu Beijie gazed at her with a profound expression, not saying a word.

Pingting gave a wan smile. “Fine. Kill me.”

As soon as she said this, her feet landed on the ground with a soft thud. Then she looked up, seeing the man so familiar yet imposing.

“This is your final chance.” Chu Beijie sighed, “Get on the horse with me and say good bye to He Xia. From then on, you will no longer be called Bai Pingting, you will be Chu.”

His words jolted through Pingting, because despite the treachery she had done, he had still left her a chance. How could I not feel grateful?

His crystal eyes stared into hers, whispering of their overwhelming love.

The Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence’s guqin.

The flower had disappeared, to a place no one knew.

I am the soul that meanders through the snow-white plains, you are the world’s sharpest blade. Between us, lies a mountain of hatred and betrayal.

High mountains, surrounded by snow. You cannot see me, I cannot see you.

A wrenching heart, never ceasing.

Pingting gazed into the distance where she could see He Xia waiting. She bit her lip hard, took a step backwards before saying, “Please leave Duke, Pingting cannot send you off.”

Chu Beijie’s face was expressionless, drained of warmth. He nodded.

“Well, well, well.....” He said then coldly added, “One day, I’ll let you know what excruciating heartache is.” With that, he turned away, bringing his whip down hard on his horse.

The horse cried loudly before rushing out, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

A lonely figure heading towards the setting sun.

Translation Notes

- *East & West (10): Dong Lin literally means “east forest”. So when Pingting and Dongzhuo escape from Dong Lin, they go west. Dong Lin lies to the west of Gui Le.*

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 11

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch11

Winter went, and spring came.

The flowers were blooming while butterflies flew, sometimes they even perched on a finger.

In a huge villa located near the borders of Gui Le and Bei Mo, Pingting stared listlessly into space.

“You’ve gotten thin these days,” He Xia stood behind her, sighing. “Pingting, you’ve changed.”

“Changed?” Pingting chuckled, flicked her finger and the butterfly flew off. She looked up, “Who has changed? Pingting’s surname is still Bai, still owned by Master, still plays qin for Master everyday.”

He Xia studied her, until she was unable to meet his eyes. Then he suddenly turned and got something behind him. “For you.”

“What?” Pingting looked at it carefully, apparently it was a sword given by Chu Beijie as a token of truce. “This is a symbol of truce between two countries. You can’t just give it to me.”

“Chu Beijie has a certain habit, at every battle, he always has a sword on his right and left. This token is the sword on his left.” He Xia paused, lowered his voice and said, “This sword is known as ‘Departed Soul’.”

Pingting’s eyes swivelled towards the centuries-old sword, stretched out a hand and slowly stroked it, repeating, “Departed Soul?”

“Back then I didn’t understand why he left the most important left sword, instead of his right sword, ‘Divine’. But now I get it. He left this sword for you,

since your soul has departed from this world.” He Xia stuffed the sword into Pingting’s hands, sighed again, then walked out of the room.

Departed Soul?

Pingting hugged the sword, the cold scabbard pressed against her skin.

She stared into space.

That’s right, her soul had disappeared while the figure disappeared on that horse.

How could I forget Chu Beijie? It was spring, the best time to admire flowers.

After everything had settled down, she spent her days and nights, carefully and precisely, thinking about Chu Beijie.

Why her heart had become mud then gradually melting into water, she did not know. She could not remember the frauds, the plotting, nor the leading to Chu Beijie’s defeat. She could only think of those three nights at Hua Residence, that time when his face was so sincere while he quietly stood vigil.

“What kind of person are you?” Pingting lifted her head, looking up at the clouds. “Do you hate me, or do you love me? Before your departure, did you pretend to be dismayed, or did you lie to me?”

He was gentle, day and night. That was true.

His deception and lies, they weren’t untrue either.

She was extremely clever, but she was extremely confused at the moment as if she were stuck in quicksand, unable to pull herself up.

Feeling a sudden heavy pain on her shoulder, Pingting turned abruptly, startled.

“Haha, daydreaming again?” Dongzhuo pretended to grimace, but seeing Pingting’s pale face, he stopped himself to laugh instead. “Eh, eh? Why’re you crying?”

Pingting hastily wiped her eyes, glared and said, “You’re never serious. You finally decided to change your habits after that incident, but a couple of days later, your cheeky habits are back again.”

Dongzhuo scratched his head, glanced at her, sat down and lifted a tea cup. “I came to see you and cheer you up. Instead you scowled at me, trying to tell me off or something.”

Pingting felt bad when she heard this. She lowered her head and mumbled, “You don’t need to worry about me, I’m perfectly healthy, and I’ll be all right in a couple of days.”

“A couple of days? We’re leaving today, so lighten up.”

“Today?” Pingting hesitated, “Where are we going?”

Dongzhuo looked stunned, like he had expected that Pingting knew all along. Something unnatural flashed on his face, but it disappeared as soon as it came. He blinked, “I only vaguely heard Master say it twice, something like... ‘Although this place has been the secret hideout of our Residence for several years, it is still within Gui Le territory. The King is still searching for us, so it’s best to leave as soon as possible...’ I don’t know where we’re going though.” He scratched his head in concentration, “Master asked me to do something by the way. I haven’t done it yet.”

Pingting watched Dongzhuo leave in a hurry, looking away long after he had gone.

Her master and Dongzhuo weren’t to blame for the propaganda in Gui Le.

Ever since returning to her Master’s side, she was like a lost soul. Others would say ten sentences whereas she would awkwardly say one sentence.

She used to partially manage the household work, but ever since falling into the hands of Dong Lin, her work had been distributed among some other maids. Her return did not affect daily life.

Just like that, life continued on.

Her master was right, though the location was fairly discrete, it was still a place where the King could move freely and so preparations must be made early. In the past, she would have realized it early on and told her master, but now... had she also lost her intelligence?

As expected, a maid came to pack her clothes up that day.

Pingting asked, "Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

"Where's Master?"

"Master is busy."

She followed her Residence's people onto a carriage when she realized that she couldn't see Dongzhuo either. "Where's Dongzhuo?"

"How am I supposed to know that? Sis Pingting, don't worry about it and sit calmly for the journey."

"Which carriage is Master on? I always sit on the same carriage with him."

"Sis Pingting, Master wants you to sit on the carriage with us and I don't know where Master is."

Only one answer could be given to every ten questions, the journey passed by without incident until they arrived at another residence. It seemed to have been secretly prepared by House of Jing-An several years ago.

Suspicious, Pingting couldn't help but forget about Chu Beijie, studying her surroundings instead.

Her uneasiness increased.

She hadn't seen her master yet and she hadn't realized what was happening before, but now she did.

"Where's Sir, the Duke?"

"The Duke doesn't know that we're here yet."

"Where is this?"

"I don't know."

Realizing that the maid really knew nothing, she tried to go outside to find her master, but she was blocked outside. "I'd like to see Master, please let me go."

To which she received blank stares, "Master is away, he will find Sis when he comes back."

She didn't see He Xia for the next couple of days and she received little news.

Pingting couldn't see her surroundings, beside or in front. Everything was blurry.

She couldn't help feeling chilled. How could things have changed so much in such a short period of time?

Was the Residence changing or was she?

Soon her sickness from last year returned.

Pingting woke up in the middle of the night, coughing. She sent for a doctor and he was busy all night.

He Xia finally re-appeared that day.

"Why are you sick again?" He Xia frowned, accusingly saying, "You never look after yourself properly. See, you've wrecked your body again. What's the point?" He personally brought and spooned the medicine to her.

Pingting stared at He Xia then broke into a smile. "Master sure is busy these days, I don't even get to see you anymore."

"I'm afraid that I'll upset you. I'm afraid that you'll work too hard, so I've hidden everything that'll upset you and make you overwork."

"About the future of the Royal House and ours, have you discussed it with the Duke here?"

"See, see. I told you I always make you worry. I'll organise everything."

Pingting propped herself up to drink the medicine, and she closed her eyes. He Xia didn't leave in a hurry. He sat beside her instead, gently rubbing her shoulder. "Go to sleep, you're as thin as bone. More food and sleep will do you well. You're so quiet these days, but it reminds me of the time when we were younger and you used to throw plates into the well."

"Being young and innocent is so nice."

"We're still good."

A smile spread across Pingting's thin face, when she suddenly thought of something. "Master, Chu Beijie once told me something."

"What did he say?"

"He said I am He Xia's maid yet I didn't know that he was a famous general."

What is famous, you say? It is distinguishing between what's important and what's not. The life of Bai Pingting is...insignificant in comparison to five years of peace."

He Xia shook his head, "Stupid girl. You believed his words all along?"

"He may be an enemy general, but I do believe in his words." Pingting looked tenderly at He Xia's face, whispering "Master is a famous general."

He Xia didn't answer.

"Pingting, ever since coming back, you've never told me anything about the Duke of Zhen-Bei."

"Chu Beijie was suspicious of me from the start; though I was often in the room while he read official documents, I couldn't read a single word on them."

There was no point in dwelling over the past.

Just like the shabby walls of the Gui Le's once-beautiful Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Defeat lay ahead, so how could one's virtues not change?

"Gui Le now has five years of peace, during these five years, the King can form a stronger army to fight against Dong Lin. Every step we take, are worthy to our country. No matter what He Su says, he is Gui Le's King, if he doesn't like us, we can't do anything about it. From now on, House of Jing-An no longer exists, for we are going to retreat into the mountains and never appear in public again." He Xia paused, then added, "But the problem is that House of Jing-An has many adversaries. Many people would love to kill us, including our King. Therefore, our secrecy will rely on one thing, that is, our location."

A bone-piercing wind chilled her heart like a rope had suddenly ended her life.

"Master..." Pingting gritted her teeth, finally managing to say, "You're suspicious of me?"

"You plotted against Chu Beijie and gained valuable time for Gui Le. You are good person. I believe in you." He Xia raised his head, closing his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and asked softly, "But Pingting, do you believe in yourself?"

Those seven words shocked her.

Pingting was completely shocked. Pain and disbelief was written all over her face.

“What are you saying?” Pingting choked out, after her voice had returned.

He Xia didn’t answer her question, “What are you clutching onto?”

“Departed Soul,” Pingting replied, “You gave it to me.”

“No, Chu Beijie gave you that.” He Xia sighed, “If you had rejected Departed Soul last time, I would have had the slightest trace of hope. I hoped that you wouldn’t have lost your soul and reason to Chu Beijie. But you accepted it. You only thought of Chu Beijie, forgetting Gui Le. When you accepted Departed Soul, did you ever think that it was only for the symbol of peace between two countries for all the peasants?”

“If I had forgotten about Gui Le, would I have lead Chu Beijie into a trap?”

He Xia looked at her, “An unstable love born amidst danger. Only when they part, do they realise the depth of their love.”

“No...”

“Pingting, ever since you came back, you’re always refusing to sit on the same carriage as me. We were always as close as siblings before this. That day, he tried to help you, a woman, down the horse, well, not many men can do that...”

“Don’t say anymore, don’t say anymore!” Pingting shook her head, a lump in her throat. She closed her eyes, a shiny tear caught in her eyelashes. “I understand.”

Backfired plotting.

It was true that she tricked Chu Beijie, yet Chu Beijie used his true feelings to trick her.

Love was true, the deception was true too.

Being with her Master in the Jing-An Ducal Residence for the last eighteen years was nothing compared to Chu Beijie’s simple trick.

For the first time in her life, Pingting realised how helplessly she had fallen into his trap. She could no longer get He Xia’s complete trust, because the truth was,

she really had fallen in love.

In this world, those who have fallen in love cannot make clear judgements.

If she were to meet Chu Beijie in the future, her actions would be completely unpredictable.

He Xia being suspicious of her was perfectly excusable.

Completely natural.

That was Chu Beijie's final trick, to make her heart ache.

Eyes wide open until sunrise, hearing the rooster crow, Pingting abruptly sat up on her bed. She groped around a bit, like she had lost her mind, until her hands finally traced the familiar patterns on the scabbard.

'Departed' and 'Soul', were the two ancient characters engraved onto it.

She thought back to the time when Chu Beijie had thrown down his sword, eyes flashing with anger and then back to what He Xia had just told her.

If she hadn't accepted it, there would still have been hope.

Yet if she did...

Eighteen years of service cleanly wiped away by a single sword.

She did not usually like to cry, but today she had more tears than ever. Her heart was like frozen water. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't.

Stiffly sitting in bed, she felt her thoughts muddle up. She rubbed her forehead.

She realised that her high temperature had returned as she pressed her cold fingertips against her burning forehead.

A maid called Lingdang, sent by He Xia, came in, carefully asking, "Sis, it's time to get up?"

She repeated the question three times until Pingting snapped back into focus, "Eh?"

Lingdang brought in some hot water, squeezed a cloth dry and gave it to Pingting. They were always moving around and everything was scattered around

the room. Lingdang searched around for the brush Pingting usually used.

Pingting, who was standing behind her, said, “Don’t bother. Find Dongzhuo for me.”

“Dongzhuo?”

“He’s not here?”

Lingdang shook her head, smiling. “I’ll check.”

The sun was bright, the scent of spring was getting stronger and stronger. The door bead curtain tinkled at Lingdang’s departure, glittering in the sunlight. At that moment, Pingting remembered the blinds at Hua Residence.

She and Lady Hua hid behind blinds, secretly peering at their guests.

That, was the time she first saw Chu Beijie.

Being the only one in the room made it feel cold, so cold that even Pingting couldn’t think too much about the past. After getting out of bed and finding her brush, she slowly brushed her long black hair beside the window, keeping her eyes on the vibrant colours of the outside world.

Red and purple flowers were half open. Lush green grass grew beside the pond. Though it was beautiful, everything was unfamiliar.

It was not the Jing-An Ducal Residence nor Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence.

“Get on the horse with me and say good bye to He Xia. From then on, you will no longer be called Bai Pingting, you will be Chu.”

“You only thought of Chu Beijie; you forgot about Gui Le. When you accepted Departed Soul, did you ever think that it was only for the symbol of peace between two countries, for all the peasants?”

She frowned, like she really wanted to end her life as soon as possible, her hands were clutched tightly to her chest while she looked back at the precious sword beside her bed.

Departed Soul.

She left Chu Beijie, but she could no longer return to the Jing-An Ducal Residence. How did she, Bai Pingting, who was the most trusted maid of the

Marquess of Jing-An, the experienced female military advisor, the girl who gained five years of peace for Gui Le, end up being a lonely spirit?

“Pingting,” came Dongzhuo’s voice somewhere behind her, “You were looking for me?”

Pingting put down her brush, turned around, her lips already forming a smile. “I want to tell you something.”

Dongzhuo looked a bit startled, he hadn’t seen Pingting for several days. He had been busy, but he still knew that something was worrying her. Seeing his friend so distraught made his playful smile disappear, replaced by a more serious, adult-like face. He lowered his head, “Tell me.”

“I’m leaving.”

Dongzhuo’s heart sank at these two words.

“Leaving?” He jerked his head up, drilling into Pingting’s black eyes. He forgot about all of his previous problems. He seemed to jolt up, pushing down the words he really wanted to say. Then he asked awkwardly, “Does Master know?”

Pingting chuckled softly, leaned against the windowsill, waving her hand. “Dongzhuo, come closer.” Clutching onto Dongzhuo’s hand, she carefully thought through what she was going to say. “Geez, you always call me Pingting this, Pingting that, but I’m actually older than you by a couple of months. You should be calling me ‘Sis’.”

Dongzhuo was so upset that he forcibly mumbled “Sis” through gritted teeth.

“Good boy,” Pingting actually did pretend to act like an older sister, lecturing. “The hardest thing for people to do is to know when to attack and when to retreat. That day, I attacked Chu Beijie. But today, it is time for me to retreat.”

“But you are a person of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, besides, where can you go? The King is attacking all the people serving the House of Jing-An, you included, and Chu Beijie will definitely hunt for you.”

“I have my own plans.”

Dongzhuo’s pent-up frustration finally exploded, “I know Master’s suspicious of you. I’ll tell Master that you’re a good person.”

“You mustn’t go.”

“I can’t stand it, Master’s the one at fault here. If he stays like this, he’ll be just as bad as our King, right?”

“Stop!” Pingting grabbed him, emphasising every word. “Master has the right to be suspicious.”

Dongzhuo stopped immediately, frowning. “What? I don’t think you have loyalties outside of our residence”

Pingting looked startled for a moment, but then she sighed. “You won’t understand even if I tell you. Anyway, when I’m gone, say that my leaving is for the best. For the entire residence, for Master and for me. Master is in a tight spot at the moment, yet I cannot help him nor can I upset him.”

“How can you upset Master?”

“Dongzhuo...” Pingting looked at him tenderly, but with a bitter smile, “Think of it like this. Master cannot neglect me due to my service but cannot relax around me due to my suspicious actions. He doesn’t dare to look after, harm or make me sad. Sigh, I feel really sorry for Master.”

“But if you go.....”

“When I leave, I will no longer be connected to the Residence. I wouldn’t be able to tell you anything, even if I wanted to.”

Dongzhuo was still shaking his head, “No. If you’re like that, aren’t you ungrateful to Master and abusing your authority?”

Pingting’s shiny eyes flashed, “That’s why I need your help. I need to leave without Master’s knowing.”

“No, no, no, I can’t hide anything from Master.”

“Of course not, but Master will lie to you. Let’s bet, if he knows what we’re planning, he will not only not announce it but secretly organise my escape.”

“I just don’t understand you!” Dongzhuo scratched his head, anxiously pacing up and down the room. Then he jerked towards Pingting, “its fine if I help you. Whether Master is at fault or not, all I know is that you were the unlucky one and I know that you will never betray our Residence. But...where could you go?

Don't forget that you're sick and that it has only been two days since..."

Pingting interrupted, "No, I'm leaving tonight."

Her tone was soft, but Dongzhuo could hear unwavering decisiveness in it. He raised an eyebrow, "If you don't tell me where you're going, I refuse to help you. You'll be outside alone and if something happens to you, I'll never have another night of sleep." His hands were clutched at his chest and he was facing Pingting.

"After leaving here, I will be free so I can go anywhere I want easily. You know that a lot of people are searching for me and did you really think I'd tell such a carefree guy like you? But the direction I plan to go is..." Pingting whispered in his ear, "north."

Did spring arrive later in the north?

Back in the days while she lived in the Royal Residence, her good friend Yangfeng once said that her dream place was the endless grasslands of the north, where thousands of cattle, sheep and horses grazed upon. Occasionally one would break into a gallop and the other horses would follow, eventually increasing into an ear-splitting sound, like the earth being torn apart.

She couldn't stay in Gui Le, while Dong Lin was even more dangerous than a dragon's cave and a tiger's den.

Why not Bei Mo?

In the distance, the red sun had yet to rise. Pingting took a deep breath of the fresh morning air. She had been resting for too long that even her bones felt cranky. The place where she had been living was hidden in a valley and had little sun. Whenever she went outside, she suddenly felt a nostalgic feeling as she stared up at the broad expanse of sky. She forgot about everything as she thought about galloping away to find her friend in Bei Mo.

Yangfeng's smile should be more radiant than ever.

Translation Notes

- Bei Mo (11): Bei Mo is another one of the four countries (the other one is Yun Chang). Bei Mo literally means "desert in the north".

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 12

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch12

During the night, Pingting safely came out from her room.

In her hands was a small bag. Accompanied by Dongzhuo, Pingting glanced back and saw flickers of light hidden in the mountain.

Which one of those was her Master's room light? She suddenly felt a wave of sadness flood through her.

"You don't need to accompany me anymore," Pingting told Dongzhuo, "You can go back now."

"I..." Dongzhuo stopped himself and hesitantly handed the reins to Pingting, mumbling, "Take care of yourself."

Pingting got onto the horse, which was a bit sudden, for she and the horse swayed slightly. As farewell, Dongzhuo softly said, "Sis..."

Pingting couldn't help but look back.

Dongzhuo seemed to be unsure of what he wanted to say, but he raised his head and said, "To be honest, I told everything about tonight to Master."

Pingting studied Dongzhuo, then glanced back at the peaceful rooms where the people of the Jing-An Ducal Residence were sleeping in. They were supposed to find out tomorrow and leave for a better hideout. She felt a pang of sadness, "What did Master say?"

"Master said, if you believe in yourself, you would stay. If you don't, we won't stop you nor would we be able to."

"Anything else?"

Dongzhuo lowered his head. “Nothing else.”

The corners of Pingting’s mouth lifted into a smile, feigning a sigh. “Dongzhuo, you’ve finally grown old enough to lie.”

“I...” Dongzhuo lowered his head even more, refusing to speak for some time. “Master also said that you should be able to go by yourself, but you asked me to help instead, which was...which was actually a final plan to force Master into a dilemma. He said that he wanted to fall into your trap and have you by his side, but now...”

“Now is the crucial moment when the fate of the House of Jing-An is decided. It’s not cruel to give up on a maid.” Pingting continued, raising her face towards the starry sky, laughing bitterly. “I’ll tell you this, Master isn’t wrong.”

Without waiting for Dongzhuo’s response, Pingting flicked down her whip.

The finest horse of her residence screamed as it galloped away. She held tightly onto the reins, tears blurring her vision.

Goodbye, dear House of Jing-An. Your brilliance, radiance, no longer has anything to do with Pingting.

Departing Soul lies on the windowsill. When the sun rises tomorrow, the burning light reflected upon its blade will be printed on my empty bed. A silhouette game we played as children.

Sadly, Pingting isn’t merciless enough.

If I were merciless enough, the blade would be slightly tilted towards the opposite building. The light would bounce off it, like off a polished mirror or a large bronze bell. The light would reflect into the distance, alerting your pursuers of your location.

Master, no, He Xia, what would you think then?

The sun began to slowly climb up the clouds of the east.

Every time she rode past, a cloud of dust followed. She continued to ride the yellow paths north.

The tear tracks on her face had long been covered with sand. Pingting glanced back, half squinting at the orange-red sun. The sun was rising soon and with it, a

strong, warm feeling rippled through her body.

“Go!” She took a gulp of water before continuing her journey.

Towards the wind she rode, through the endless plains of yellow mud. Bei Mo lay beyond, a place where there was no He Xia and no Chu Beijie.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 13

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch13

The wild yet fresh grass was just as pretty as Yangfeng claimed.

She had finally reached Bei Mo. A world of nature stretched before her, perhaps it was because of the proud mountains or maybe the passing of winter and the feeling of spring was much stronger than back in the South. In the midst of the lush green forest, energetic-looking shrubs dazzled in the sunlight.

A clear stream ran from the top to the bottom of the mountain.

Some other people had tied their horses to a tree and were busy filling their sacks with the clear water.

A slightly cold breeze enveloped her petite body which wasn't particularly pretty, but somewhat gaunt. Her eyes gleamed brighter than black crystals. She touched her forehead briefly before galloping away, her eyes never leaving the distance.

Far away, shepherds were sang while gathering up their stock.

"An eagle flies, the sky is higher. Ah, beautiful girl, chasing young foals on the grasslands..."

Pingting couldn't help but laugh as she grabbed the sac of water from her waist.

So cold. It must be melted ice from the mountain tops.

She playfully sipped again, and this time she closed her eyes too. So sweet.

Nearly there. The tiring yet worthwhile impression people usually had was at the back of her mind but all she could think about was her close friend's hiding

place. Choosing an old tree, she leaned on it to rest before closing her eyes.

Yangfeng's choice to escape everything no matter what, was that a good choice? In half a day, she'd be able to know the answer.

What about the path Pingting chose? Going to Bei Mo wasn't a bad idea as it did have blue sky and green grass. Maybe she was suited to such places, among the rough but pure and honest folks, among the less calculating people.

Gurgling water, magnificent green mountain.

Her eyes were still closed when she heard footsteps approach her.

Someone's there? Pingting opened her eyes. Another traveller was apparently admiring the view, the reins of his horse in his hands.

A man with broad shoulders, the sword that hung from his waist and the bow on his back seemed to be things he deemed important. It was difficult to tell his age due to his beard, but his eyes were bright.

When he realised that there was already someone else there, in particular a big eyed girl, he looked a bit stunned.

"Nice horse." The man wasn't interested in Pingting herself but her horse, as his eyes were genuinely appreciative.

Pingting smiled, untied her horse, time to go.

"Miss, are you willing to sell it?" His voice was loud, definitely a man of the grasslands.

He was right. This horse was one of the very best, even in Jing-An Ducal Residence. Dongzhuo, that guy, was quite nice, as he had chosen a good horse and had given a lot of money to Pingting.

"Not selling." She jumped onto her horse casually, trying to get over her joy. Pingting closed her eyes for several seconds before opening them again. "Mister, Petal Cottage is ahead right?"

"You're going to Petal Cottage?"

"Yes."

"Do you live in Petal Cottage?"

“No, I’m just looking for someone.”

The man laughed, “That cottage is abandoned. You won’t find anyone there.”

“They moved?” Pingting was surprised, “Why move? Where did they go?” Suddenly her thoughts were muddled. Yangfeng would never move unless something happened.

Pingting decided that Yangfeng hadn’t contacted her new location due to safety reasons, but this only made her more concerned about her friend.

“They moved only recently.”

“Where did they move to?”

“Hey, Miss, sell me this horse.” Good horses were just as important to shepherds as the girl they liked.

A corner of Pingting’s mouth lifted. “Do you know what happened to Petal Cottage? What’s your name?”

“I’m A-Han. Now, are you going to sell your horse or not?”

She jumped off her horse and thrust the reins into his waiting hands. “I’ll give it to you for no charge. All I want to know is what happened to my friend.”

A-Han shook his head violently. “I don’t want something without giving anything back in return.” He took out enough silver to buy two good horses and gave her the coins. “I’ll tell you this; the landlord of Petal Cottage is an important person! He’s the famous General Ze Yin! Who would’ve thought he had a small cottage in the mountains? But since the King has sought him out, given him more rewards and made him govern Bei Mo, he decided to move out of the mountains. Everyone else who had been living in the mountains has gone as well.”

“Really?” Pingting frowned, pondering. She threw back A-Han’s money. “Take this. I’ll use it to buy your horse. After all, I do need one. She ought to have changed to a horse without the House of Jing-An security imprint a long time ago.

“No, my horse isn’t that good. I can’t take advantage of things like this.”

Pingting untied his horse and jumped on it, then turned back towards him,

winking cheerfully. “Tall guy, save up some money and marry a good wife. You’re a good person!” She gently whipped her new horse, leaving peals of silvery laughter behind.

The cool air of the grasslands was enough to brighten her mood, the freshly cut grass smell was incomparable to that of Gui Le and Dong Lin. The shepherds continued their lively songs, which echoed in Pingting’s ears.

“My beloved prairie, these cows and horses, the stream that flows through the young blades of grass. All this, cannot be compared to my beautiful girl...”

Pingting smiled, but it did little to conceal her worried frown.

Ze Yin, the mighty general of Bei Mo, hadn’t he promised to make Yangfeng happy no matter the cost? Yet now he had decided to answer the Bei Mo King by returning into the political world; what did that mean?

Originally, she would only need half a day by horse, until she would be able to see Yangfeng, at Petal Cottage. But now, it seemed that she’d have to go even further into Bei Mo’s capital — to Bei Yali.

“You won’t even let me have a few days of happiness?” Pingting wrinkled her nose up at the sky. Travelling alone had given Pingting the habit of talking to herself.

Is it really a good thing that the House of Jing-An is no longer a part of me? What about Dong Lin? Sigh, Chu Beijie...

Unconsciously she started to frown. Her fingers slowly rubbed her eyebrows as if they were rubbing away the pain she felt.

Learning how loud the people of the grasslands shouted, she brought down the whip hard. Dust came again as the graceful figure got smaller and smaller into the distance.

Dust and sunset; where were the heartbroken people?

I hope the sky has a soul, one that will give both grass and forgiveness. No matter where I go, I hope happiness follows.

Bei Mo’s general, Ze Yin, only returned back to the political world after being summoned three times by the King.

It wasn't like that the Bei Mo King didn't value Ze Yin.

Back then, his reputation was someone young and brave, the idol of the naïve Bei Mo King, but then he suddenly decided to retire and gave up his promising future for a reason he refused to say.

"Must be love," guessed the Bei Mo King.

It wasn't just a saying that men often chose beautiful women over their country.

Ze Yin had stood before the Bei Mo King, his lips playing into a carefree smile. His smile was so innocent that the King of Bei Mo wondered if he really would be able to keep Bei Mo's best general by his side.

When a man falls in love, nothing will stop him from wanting to do stupid things.

The Bei Mo King couldn't help but nod.

And now, Ze Yin was back.

The news of Bei Mo's favourite general returning to protect the country was bound to bring joy and pleasure to all of the people.

Bei Yali had been a scene of joy and song as Ze Yin entered the city, leading the other residents of Petal Cottage. He was not only greeted by the Bei Mo King himself but he had also been greeted by the eager cheers of thousands upon thousands of peasants.

The newly designed residence was already waiting for Ze Yin, decorated and glittering brilliantly.

Yangfeng was in the most magnificent building, listening to the chatter that still managed to flow through the thick walls. Ze Yin was summoned back into the political side. She was pleasantly surprised to find herself being visited by an old friend.

The maid at the door refused to notify her name and Yangfeng's eyes were so big that they looked as if they were going to fall.

"How long are you going to stare at me?" Pingting was sitting on a chair, smiling as she said this.

“Long time no see, so why won’t you let me have a good look at you?” Yangfeng gave a faint sigh, stretching towards Pingting, her fingers as white as ivory. “Pingting, come here. Let me have a good look at you.”

Pingting grinned and laughed, “Yes sir, my General...no, wife of a General.” She walked towards Yangfeng, sitting down on the bed beside her.

The two pairs of equally intelligent eyes stared into each other, the reflection of each other perfectly imprinted inside them.

“You’ve lost some weight.”

Pingting couldn’t help but smile, “You’ve become prettier.”

“I really missed you; I just can’t stop thinking of our childhood. I can’t really talk to anyone else apart from you.”

“Yangfeng...” Pingting interrupted, “Why didn’t you ask about it?”

“Ask?” Yangfeng’s smile wavered slightly, so she lowered her head. “I...don’t dare ask. Why would you leave your Master, unless for some unspeakable reason? That reason must be very, very scary.”

Like the rumbling of a drum, Pingting chuckled. “It’s really quite thrilling when you think about it. Play a song for me and I’ll tell you everything from the start.”

The qin was on the small table beside the bed. Yangfeng looked at her, deep in thought. She picked up the qin, fingertips lightly touching a string.

Tremble.

Her heart fluttered at the inaudible but existing sound of a plucked string. The pressure, the sadness, in her heart jumped up, breaking through the walls she had built over her emotions.

“Yangfeng!” Pingting cried, flying into the arms of Yangfeng, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Let the tears flow down and into the earth. This wasn’t Gui Le, nor was it Dong Lin. The person who made her sad wasn’t here nor was the person who made her soulless here.

How was she supposed to forget that beautiful winter day, that gentle night,

that tall figure, or the crystal-clear memories of living in the Residence for the last eighteen years?

How was she supposed to make Yangfeng realise that she had fallen in love with a man? She loved him but then hurt and lied to him. She even made the decision to leave him even if it meant death, only to realise that she could no longer return to the Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Today, under Yangfeng's solemn eyes, Pingting was finally able to cry out the pain she felt, and they came out like peas being poured out of a bag.

Under this sky, perhaps only Yangfeng understood her heart.

Pingting just cried without speaking, leaving Yangfeng to guess what had happened. It had to be something to do with love, or else Pingting wouldn't be so upset.

But who had the ability to make arrogant Pingting fall in love?

"What's his name?" Yangfeng patted her hair.

Pingting was still tearful as she clenched her teeth, her words full of pain.
"Chu. Bei. Jie."

Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei? Yangfeng looked slightly inattentive, but then she sighed again, softly saying, "Cry. Have a good cry."

The walls did not close as Pingting collapsed again into Yangfeng's arms, tears dripping.

"Yangfeng, I'm now finally..." Pingting sluggishly pulled herself up but then suddenly stopped as she felt something rise in her throat. She shrieked a "waah" as she coughed up red blood.

"Pingting!" Yangfeng stood up, staring at her dyed-red clothes. "Come! Someone, come!"

And so, after her big cry, she got sick again.

Only yesterday, she had been thinking that she wouldn't be so lonely anymore.

Pingting's sickness was back.

Way more intense and dangerous than before.

Thanks to the service readily available at the Residence though, immediate treatment was given to her. Under Ze Yin and Yangfeng's care, Pingting slowly got better again.

After couple days of rest, Pingting was able to sit up again. Her big cry had done her good as her chest was no longer always in pain, and although she was very sick, she recovered faster than previous times.

"You're looking better," said a voice from a familiar figure on the other side of the blinds. Yangfeng came in, laughing. "The doctor says that you'll be able to get out of bed in two days. My, you sure scared me."

"Come, sit here." Pingting patted a spot beside her on the bed.

Yangfeng sat before taking out a hairpin to which she carefully inserted into Pingting's hair. Studying her, she said, "This is what the King gave Ze Yin, I didn't look that good wearing it so I'll give it to you."

Pingting checked herself in the mirror that Yangfeng brought. "Did you bring it to me deliberately?" Pingting paused again, asking, "Does the General know where I come from?"

"He didn't ask," Yangfeng replied. "As long as you're my friend, he will protect you, but..." The face that was slightly plumper saddened. "He's about to lead his troops out of the capital."

The atmosphere was suddenly gloomy like heavy clouds covering the sun in summer.

Pingting took the mirror out of Yangfeng's hands, put it on the bedside table, but didn't say anything.

Yangfeng said, "We were always close. I didn't lose to you in qin, but I am absolutely inferior to you when it comes to scheming."

Pingting forced her lips into a smile, "You were always arrogant. When did you humble up so much?"

"I'm just a little clever, someone who lives among walls, surrounded by her husband's people whether it be in Petal Cottage or in the General's Residence.

When it comes to military affairs, you are the one who represents all women.” Yangfeng’s deep black eyes drilled into Pingting before softly asking, “Why does the Bei Mo King suddenly want Ze Yin to regain military power? Ze Yin isn’t greedy for money or fame unless Bei Mo is in big trouble. He wouldn’t sacrifice everything and bring me here, despite his oath. I don’t understand, Pingting, can you tell me what’s going on?” Yangfeng stressed on every syllable.

Life outside the window was full of life, but the room was a deathly quiet.

Pingting was silent; her head was bowed.

Yangfeng’s inquiring eyes blazed towards her head. Sometime later, Pingting appeared to be tired as she lifted her head and leaned on a soft pillow. With a wry smile, she said, “Chu Beijie fell into a trap, and was forced to leave his sword. He vowed not to attack Gui Le in the next five years. Dong Lin’s King wants to conquer all lands, and since Gui Le is currently an impossible feat, it’s natural that he’d change his target. Basically, does this means Dong Lin has already started to attack Bei Mo?”

“Yeah,” Yangfeng frowned wearily, “These days, Ze Yin is always talking about Chu Beijie, Dong Lin’s best general, the Duke of Zhen-Bei...these days people call him the Demon King from the depths of Hell. A lot of people have already died in his hands.”

Her eyes stared into Pingting and then her lips slowly rose into a soft and flowery smile. “Don’t worry, we don’t have any control over men’s things. I really don’t understand why they’re always trying to expand the King’s territory. Is having a lasting impression really that important? Ze Yin is going soon so I want to spend some more time with him these days.” She stood up, her hands pressing gently against Pingting’s shoulders. “You’ve only just gotten better, so lie down a bit more. If it gets boring here, ask some the maids to go outside and pick some flowers for you. If you have any problems, send someone to find me.”

Yangfeng left through the bead curtain. The sudden tinkling sound seemed to upset Pingting as she frowned.

It seemed like there was a huge trap in every direction, one that people could not escape from.

And it was something terrible.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 14

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch14

It seemed that the green grasslands refused to be Pingting's paradise. Around four, before sunrise, a tired figure stood quietly next to the window.

The birds and flowers that danced in the sunlight were long gone, and if you went out with just a candle, the flowers looked more like claws, reaching out for their oblivious prey.

Yangfeng's husband had already left for his journey and Pingting, who was deep inside the Residence, heard the servants whispering about how the big, heroic generals were all leaving at the same time but many wondered how likely the success would be.

Don't even think about it.

Pingting shook her head. She gazed at the undistinguishable grasslands and at the bright moon but then suddenly squinted in pain.

"Let's swear to the moon, never turn our backs on each other."

That person said to the moon, in his unwavering rich deep voice. Her heart raced as she thought of him, her hands were clutched at her chest, and she bit her lips.

Don't think about it, but she couldn't forget. Back then when, she thought, when we swore to the moon, you owed me and I owed you.

She was feeling depressed when she saw a light flickering towards her in the distance. Pingting watched its red light beckoning closer, but she only realised who it was only when the lamp was very close.

"Why are you still awake?"

Yangfeng hadn't expected that someone would be by the window and she jumped back in surprise. "I should be the one asking. Why are you still awake?" She broke into a laugh, "Don't tell me I'm a failure as a hostess and that I failed to meet the needs of my guest?"

Pingting walked out of the door and eyed the maid who was accompanying Yangfeng curiously. She took her arm and led her inside.

"We haven't had time to catch up for a while now, so as a guest, I'll be holding onto my hostess today."

The two sat on the bed together and looked at each other fondly. "Burning incense this late?" Pingting asked.

"He's been gone for a couple of days already, but I just can't fall asleep until late at night." Yangfeng sighed quietly. She leaned on a pillow, half of her face covered by the soft cotton. She gazed at Pingting with a child-like face, "You mustn't laugh at me."

Pingting couldn't help but smile at this but she didn't dare make a sound either.

"I said, you mustn't laugh." Yangfeng saw her smile so she got up and pinched Pingting.

"There's nothing wrong with missing your husband, so why does it matter whether I laugh or not? I heard that some famous generals always promise their wives to write a letter home every day to stop them from worrying all the time. I'm not wrong, am I?"

Yangfeng's white face flashed to a bright red, "You're still laughing? If you mock me anymore, I'll be going."

But Pingting bit her lip to hide her laughter and Yangfeng knew that it was a lost battle. She flashed Pingting an evil glare and lay back down again.

Crisp laughter flooded into the room like the sound of a stream gushing down a mountain.

The two seemed to be back in the past where they would laugh all the time. Yangfeng broke the nostalgic atmosphere by sighing. "I haven't laughed like this

since becoming the General's wife."

Just one sentence and all memories were put away again; Pingting stopped laughing and lowered her head in silence.

Yangfeng hesitated for what seemed like ages, when she gently asked, "Will they meet on the battlefield?" The biggest problem was finally touched upon, causing the air to feel heavy.

Yangfeng seemed unwilling to look at Pingting in the eye, as she turned to face the wall. "If they do meet, who will win?" she questioned.

"Both are exceptional, the victory will depend on God. I...I don't know."

Yangfeng's face was expressionless, "God does not fight battles, only generals and their tactics. Ze Yin versus Chu Beijie. Who do you think will win?"

Pingting was still shaking her head, her eyes falling on the swaying flowers outside the window. "Do you...really want my answer? Chu Beijie is Dong Lin's best general, his army and battle skills are exceptional, outstanding. Your husband is the most celebrated general in Bei Mo, but I have never seen him myself. How am I supposed to compare the two?" She wanted to smile to cheer up Yangfeng, but she couldn't muster up any strength to do so.

Dear to the moon is outside, you don't need to be so heartless. You see the love and friendship of humanity, but you do nothing to stop the bloodshed of those people.

The candle wick sizzled and Pingting turned to look at it. The wind blew in like uninvited guests.

The light flickered, flared up, and then went out.

The silence that followed was like a heavy curtain, crushing them.

"Pingting..." Yangfeng said sadly, "Don't you have anything assuring to say to me?"

Pingting was surprised. She quickly sat up, "Yangfeng, why would you ask that?"

Yangfeng was facing the other way. Silence. Pingting could make out that she was trembling, like she was fighting back her tears. "Don't cry, we can't do

anything about these battles. God will bless your husband so that he will return home safely. Yangfeng, didn't...you say that battles aren't our business?"

Yangfeng's shoulders shook even more. She was usually always so calm and collected, and Pingting had never seen her so distraught. She gently turned Yangfeng until she was facing herself.

Yangfeng suddenly sat up and looked at Pingting, her cheeks stained with tears.

Pingting was alarmed yet gently asked, "Yangfeng?"

Yangfeng didn't answer, she simply jumped out of bed and knelt at Pingting.

Pingting was flabbergasted. She too jumped out of bed to help Yangfeng up. "Why are you doing this?"

But Yangfeng had decided not to get up. She pulled at Pingting's sleeves, looking up at her indignantly, but her voice was mournful when she said, "Pingting, do you really not understand?"

Pingting was shocked, her dark eyes staring down quizzically at her friend.

"If even the Marquess of Jing-An was not able to defeat Chu Beijie, then how is Ze Yin supposed to do so?" Each word was dragged out of Yangfeng's mouth, her hands clawing at Pingting's feet as she cried, "You made a deal for five years of peace for Gui Le, so why can't you drive Chu Beijie and his troops out of Bei Mo?"

"Yangfeng, I..." Pingting took a step back and slumped on the bed. "I can't do that."

She could not face Chu Beijie, but how was Yangfeng supposed to understand that?

That man, although he was not in front of her physically, he was always there in her dreams. He had taken her soul, leaving her in a puddle of tears.

"Pingting, please, I beg you."

Yangfeng's praying eyes sent a chill up Pingting's spine. She could not bear seeing Yangfeng's gentle, wise eyes being engulfed by the colours of despair.

But she still shook her head, “No.”

Both pairs of black pupils shook and their breathing seemed to have stopped altogether.

Yangfeng stared at her for a long while. She smiled sadly, “I don’t blame you. Men....Military affairs...I don’t even know half as much as you.” She was chuckling, but more tears slipped down her cheeks as she patted her lower abdomen.

Pingting noticed that she was acting slightly differently than usual. Realisation suddenly dawned her. “Yangfeng, don’t tell me you...” Her voice trailed off, her eyes never leaving her lower abdomen.

Yangfeng clenched her teeth and nodded.

Pingting sighed and leaned against the bed rail.

Those two, Yangfeng and Pingting, were never destined to be away from everything after all.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 15

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch15

Evening came; the soft breeze left. A frosty dawn.

As the red sun rose from the east, bright colours were casted onto Bei Mo King's Royal Residence. The Bei Mo King was already awake. He hadn't slept well and had insomnia for the last couple of days. Ever since the Dong Lin troops had arrived, he slept less and less every passing day just like how the Dong Lin army pressed closer towards the capital. According to yesterday's report, Chu Beijie had begun a siege, and many Bei Mo soldiers were wounded or dead. Thanks to Ze Yin's efforts, Dong Lin soldiers haven't reached the capital yet, but the current army population certainly wasn't big enough to last another siege.

Losing Kanbu was only a matter of time.

When the Dong Lin army captured Kanbu, it would be like an expressway to capture the capital of Bei Mo. Bei Mo was in grave danger.

Yangfeng came to see him early in the morning.

"I want to tell you about someone, King." She bowed before speaking and wore a dress given to her by the King himself.

The Bei Mo King always had a good impression of Ze Yin's favourite woman, and now that Ze Yin was gone, he was even happier to see her. He smiled kindly at Yangfeng. "Oh? Who's important enough that needs you to personally introduce to me?"

Yangfeng replied softly. "King, you really are clever. This person is extremely skillful and could perhaps change the course of the war."

Yangfeng came with Ze Yin when he returned to the capital, but she was

already the prettiest woman in the Royal Residence. She was born with delicate bone shapes, those that leave a lasting impression on others. He had heard about her personality from Ze Yin and knew that she did not like empty promises. She would never say something unless she was at least seventy or eighty percent sure. The King was surprised. “Who? Bring him in.”

But Yangfeng wasn’t so urgent. She fell onto her knees and said, “Sir, this person’s surname is Bai and is named Pingting. We’ve been good friends since childhood. Pingting didn’t want to do this at the start, but Yangfeng begged. My friend finally agreed but on three conditions.”

“Speak.”

“Yes,” Yangfeng responded. “Firstly, help will only be given when Bei Mo is in trouble. If Dong Lin ever retreats, my friend will leave and never be involved with Bei Mo again.”

The Bei Mo King couldn’t care less. After all, there was no secure frontier. He nodded gladly and said, “I will not force anyone to do what they don’t want to.”

“Secondly, no person in Bei Mo shall identify or research Bai Pingting’s past.”

“This...” Ever since the four countries started fighting, each country had their own spies. If Kings need people, they would need to research their history intensively. If they didn’t, wouldn’t that lead to the ruin of their own country? Why was this Pingting, so secretive? The Bei Mo King was annoyed but didn’t show it as Yangfeng was personally introducing this person.

Yangfeng saw his expression and quietly added, “King doesn’t have to worry. My friend has had many painful moments thus doesn’t want anyone to know. There won’t be betrayal; I’ll put my life on the line to prove that.”

From this, the Bei Mo King immediately relaxed. The sides of his mouth twitched into a laugh. “Employment depends on the King himself. I’ll decide whether this person is trustworthy or not. So what’s the point of putting your life on the line to prove loyalty? What’s the third condition?”

Yangfeng answered, “If the King doesn’t want Bei Mo to be conquered, you must listen to every word. Nothing can be changed.”

This was the same as giving governorship of Bei Mo to a stranger. Bei Mo’s

smile instantly evaporated. He coldly said, "If your friend wants Bei Mo military power, shouldn't he just ask to be an army general?"

Unexpectedly Yangfeng replied, "Military power is one of the things she wants. Yangfeng begs King to give her all commanding rights to Pingting. She'll definitely drive away the Dong Lin army."

The Bei Mo King's face changed. He forced himself to smile while thinking of saving Ze Yin from shame. "Your friend really likes to brag. Even your husband doesn't dare to underestimate the mighty general of Dong Lin, Chu Beijie, yet your friend..." Suddenly his heart jumped, and in astonishment he cried, "She?"

"Yes."

The Bei Mo King looked even more unamused. He leaned forward. "How can a woman have such skill? Fine, give her some money and send her home." How ridiculous. The enemy had arrived in their country, so many of the army generals needed his expertise whereas he listened to the rubbish chatter of an idiotic woman.

Yangfeng bowed, wondering whether to clarify things, but she hadn't expected his support in the first place. Without the help of Pingting, wouldn't her husband die? She bit her lip. "Please listen to me one last time, King."

The Bei Mo King couldn't bring himself to embarrass her so he generously nodded. "You may speak."

Yangfeng hesitated before walking towards him. She whispered in his ear. "I promised Pingting not to tell anyone, but as the lives of the Bei Mo people are at stake, Yangfeng must tell you. King mustn't underestimate Pingting. Ze Yin may not be Chu Beijie's opponent but Pingting definitely is."

"What do you mean?"

"Because Pingting forced Chu Beijie into a truce for five years before this."

The Bei Mo King was startled. He turned around and stared at Yangfeng.

Yangfeng didn't waver under the Bei Mo King's attention. She nodded slowly and whispered, "Chu Beijie has feelings for Pingting. If he knows that she is in Bei Mo, he won't attack so hard, and Ze Yin will have a greater chance of victory."

“But what if...”

“If Chu Beijie can’t forgive her, then...” Yangfeng felt a lump in her throat and her face looked sad. “Why would King ask Yangfeng such a cruel question?” Thinking of Pingting outside the room made her heart twist. Fighting back her tears, the beauty said, “Please King, summon Pingting immediately.”

“Call for Pingting.”

“Call for Pingting!” Voices overtook one another until it reached the waiting Pingting. She settled down her teacup, checked over her clothes, and sighed deeply before stepping into the room, walking calmly towards the Bei Mo King.

Where in the world is a place you can escape from everything? She was now being swept in the Bei Mo’s world of politics and military.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 16

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch16

“King.” Pingting bowed after stepping lightly into the Bei Mo Royal Residence’s main hall.

The Bei Mo King did not take offense when Pingting did not bow the most respectful way possible. Instead, he laughed. “You may get up. Yangfeng seems to really like you, My Lady, saying that you can shoo away the invading Dong Lin soldiers, is that true?”

Pingting sighed. If the Bei Mo King didn’t hesitate when calling her ‘My Lady’, it meant that the situation in the army wasn’t so good, so Bei Mo could only beg a fallen star like her. Could she really defeat Chu Beijie?

She was clearly distressed, but it was already too late. Pingting could see the hopeful eyes of Yangfeng who stood in front of her. “Your humble servant shall do her best,” she said softly.

“Thanks to My Lady’s words, Bei Mo now has hope.” The Bei Mo King exchanged a look with Yangfeng before clapping his hands and cheering. His face then softened slightly. He spoke in a humble tone. “The army is in immediate danger; Dong Lin armies are approaching Kanbu. What will be My Lady’s plans?”

Ever since Pingting decided to help Bei Mo, she had been studying Bei Mo maps at night, giving a quick, preliminary analysis over possible formations and tactics. She had not, however, known that the Dong Lin army had reached Kanbu so she was slightly surprised. “So the Bei Mo army has already been forced to the closest outer village? How come the messengers that have come back don’t know about that?”

All of the information she knew came from Yangfeng, so she could not help but to look at her. Yangfeng hadn't known about this either; her face was pale as she shook her head no at Pingting.

The Bei Mo King gave a wry smile. "It was in the recent report late last night. The people of Bei Yali are afraid so I stopped the news from spreading. Luckily we have Ze Yin, or it'd be much worse. We should be able to secure Kanbu for a little longer under the command of Ze Yin but even he will not last much longer." The ruler unclenched his hands and sighed towards the ceiling. His eyes then flickered over to Pingting.

Pingting returned Bei Mo's stare, nodding to show she understood. "No wonder King is willing to use a foreigner like me." The situation was much worse than she had originally thought. Chu Beijie really deserved his title as Dong Lin's fiercest general.

She felt flustered, but she knew that something had to be done, or Yangfeng's unborn child would have no father. She forced herself to calm down, closed her eyes and thought hard.

The Bei Mo King and Yangfeng knew that she was thinking very hard. They did not make a sound, just quietly waited.

It was so silent in the main hall that it was difficult to breathe.

After a while, Pingting slowly opened her bright eyes which seemed to be full of new-found confidence. She smiled at Yangfeng then spun around to the Bei Mo King. "Maybe there is something I can do, but I need King's full support."

The Bei Mo King remembered Yangfeng's prior words. Without a trace of hesitation, he said, "My Lady can make as many requests as needed, be it money or materials."

"Good, then I'd like to ask King to tell me the truth. Does Bei Mo have a spy on the Dong Lin King's side?"

Bei Mo suddenly went silent, he'd only thought that Pingting would take frontline command of the army, not ask something like this. During times of wars, opposing countries always had spies, so that some confidential information could be obtained. But each country was careful with their spies,

while cautious of others around them being spies of other countries. Though not many were sent at a time, the best was always sent and they were always the country's biggest secret.

Pingting could see the Bei Mo King's hesitation, so she explained herself. "I, your humble servant, do not mean to pry too much. It's just that this plan needs to be carried out by the people close to the Dong Lin King. King does not need to tell me the names of the spies, just tell me whether or not anyone can get close to the Dong Lin King's food."

"Eh!" Yangfeng exclaimed, "Don't tell me Pingting wants to poison the Dong Lin King?"

The Bei Mo King frowned, "That won't work. Sorry to say My Lady, I do actually have one or two people beside the Dong Lin King. Occasionally, they do have access to his food. However, all Kings nowadays have precautionary guidelines to prevent their food being poisoned and specialists to check for poison before consumption. Even if my people tamper the food, it will never reach the Dong Lin King's mouth. It'll be a useless attempt, and they'll know that there are spies in their residence."

To which Pingting calmly replied, "That wouldn't be a problem if the poison isn't detectable."

"A poison like that exists?"

"It's not exactly a poison; it's more like an anaesthetic." Pingting laughed, "It's a formula I came up with myself some time ago, you can put it into food and most inspection methods can't detect it. Adults can be in a coma for more than ten days and the pulse is much weaker, like the person is dying away slowly, but they'll wake up after some time."

"If it can pass the inspections, then all problems are solved," The Bei Mo King enthused, "I would have never imagined you'd be this clever! How long do you need to make this anaesthetic?"

"It's mainly made up of a variety of herbs, but we don't have time. We have to force the Dong Lin King into a coma before they conquer Kanbu," Pingting answered thoughtfully and then she added, "I should be able to make it in a day."

“Good!” The Bei Mo King smiled, “If the Dong Lin King suddenly falls unconscious, the Dong Lin Royal House would definitely fall into chaos because there will be a fight for the throne. Chu Beijie would have to retreat and return home by then.” He laughed but soon sighed as if he thought of something else.

Yangfeng didn’t understand, but Pingting did. She smiled slightly in response, “King is probably sighing over the effectiveness of this anaesthetic since it only lasts for about ten days. If there was a fatal poison that could pass the inspections, wouldn’t the Dong Lin King be exterminated for once?” That was exactly what the Bei Mo King was thinking and she sighed as well. “I’ve spent a long of time and effort, trying to improve this formula, but it’s never been able to fully kill someone. If I could do it, Gui Le wouldn’t be torn apart by Dong Lin. Maybe it’s God’s will. If I could make such poison, maybe every country would face threats instead of the promise of peace.”

Yangfeng listened carefully and she thought of Ze Yin back in Kanbu, fighting. Her heart hurt, she couldn’t help but whisper, “Why must good people fight and kill?”

The King of Bei Mo was still a King after all. He immediately, in the most practical way possible, returned to the original topic. “After the anaesthetic is made and is transported, Kanbu will be in a dangerous situation...What would My Lady do then?”

“That’s right, King.” Pingting had guessed that the Bei Mo King would ask that. “We should first send people around the Dong Lin soldiers and spread rumours that there is an internal war in the Dong Lin royal family and the Dong Lin King is very sick. Chu Beijie will eventually hear the rumours but will not take them very seriously at first. However, there’ll definitely be official messengers from Dong Lin. This will confirm that the Dong Lin King is in a coma and force Chu Beijie to retreat.”

Bei Mo King’s eyes shone as he praised. “My Lady, that really is a powerful, comprehensive plan. It attacks the enemy both physically and psychologically.”

“King flatters me.” Pingting lowered her eyes, in politeness. “On the other hand, if Dong Lin attacks through the Kanbu’s defence line first, the enemy troops will attack Bei Yali. If that happens, I’m afraid that the official messengers

won't be able to reach Chu Beijie by then. That's why King must order some troops to stay around Bei Yali just to give Chu Beijie the impression that Bei Yali won't be easy enough to conquer in a short time."

"I don't know anyone else more suitable to the task than you, My Lady." At this, the Bei Mo King hesitated before taking the long prepared the flag of command. The Bei Mo King stared at the person before him, one who was about to become the highest army commander but looked very much like a weak woman. In a deep voice he said, "Be careful My Lady. Bei Mo's fate is in your hands now, My Lady."

Yangfeng took a deep breath of cold air and walked towards Pingting. "I'll send Ze Yin a letter, telling him about you. With him around, you won't encounter the pain of soldiers not listening to your commands."

Pingting's hands closed around the flag of command. She was silent, thoughts already flying over to Kanbu. How could she not be nervous? She was about to see Chu Beijie again. Only this time, they would be separated by thousands of horses, men, and bloodstained fields – it was time for confrontation.

Translation Notes

- Flag of command/command flag: Most kings don't go to war, so they choose someone on behalf of them.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 17

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch17

The next day, the anaesthetic was completely prepared. Instead of going back to the Royal Residence, Pingting simply gave the anaesthetic to Yangfeng and told her how to use it. “Don’t get it wrong. There’s only enough to for one person.”

Yangfeng gingerly took it over, not exactly understanding. “Why don’t you make enough for two, just in case something unexpected happens?”

Pingting gave an unfathomable smile, “I have my reasons. Those who spy in the enemy’s country must be wise, brave, and cautious. They won’t waste such a precious compound. Don’t worry.”

Her confident stance helped to persuade Yangfeng to calm down who then hid the anaesthetic close to her body. “When I get back into the royal quarters, I’ll give the King this anaesthetic. Your escort team is ready to go, waiting for your command.” She took out letter with a military stamp seal from one of her sleeves and handed it to Pingting. “Put this away carefully and give it to Ze Yin when you see him.”

“You’ve written everything about me in it.”

“It’s to let him know everything should be better and make things easier for you to control the troops.” Yangfeng saw a sly look in Pingting’s dark eyes. Two red clouds immediately rushed to her cheeks. In a warning tone, she said, “Don’t peek. Apart from talking about you, the rest is between husband and wife. Little girls like you won’t understand.”

Pingting laughed, “I don’t see why it’d matter if I can’t understand it anyway.” Yangfeng stamped her foot in response. Pingting shook her head and replied, “It’s hard to tell that you’re the wife of a top army official sometimes. People like you are supposed to be extremely wise. Instead, you easily get dishelmed by me. As for me, I have a great responsibility ahead – I’m about to go and fight on the battlefield. Call the escort team now. It’s about time to go.” Then she walked out of the room.

“Pingting!”

“What’s wrong?” Pingting turned around, her heart secretly in pain. She had forced a breezy expression onto her face just a moment ago, but if Yangfeng began a sorrowful farewell speech, it would provoke her into crying again. She was going to face Chu Beijie again.

If the army found out that their new commander had been crying, how would they take her seriously?

Yangfeng darted out of the room and stopped four or five feet away from Pingting. Her dark eyes stared at Pingting for the briefest moment. “No matter what you do, you’ll always be a girl. You’ll be the main advisor of the army so stay in the headquarters. Don’t force yourself out onto the battlefield.”

Pingting was stunned. It took a while for her to comprehend what she had heard. Her heart was touched. She gently held onto Yangfeng’s hand. “Don’t worry. How could I ever not know my limits? It was just joke when I said that I’m about to fight on the battlefield; I can barely pick up a knife and sword. It’s getting late, I really ought to go. I’ll be back with victory to see your baby. Oops, your baby won’t be born yet right?”

Yangfeng was very upset nonetheless. The barely controlled tears were flowing fast. She bit her lip. “Joking even when becoming the nation’s leading general.” She was silent for some time, her tears continued to drip down.

When she looked up, Pingting was no longer before her. Faraway, the garden’s gates closed and the figures were gone.

The horses of the carriage galloped, leaving clouds of yellow dust behind, dusty enough to stop people from seeing the road itself.

Sometime later, Pingting opened the curtain and squinted at her surroundings.

Her head ached during the time in the carriage. She had been repeatedly studying the maps of Kanbu, memorising the names of every slope, mountain and river. She had even assessed the situation of the Bei Mo army from the news the Bei Mo King told and could easily recite the names of the army generals and their expertise.

“Nearly at Kanbu.” Pingting muttered to herself and couldn’t help but sigh at the thought.

She spent every minute, every second on the map and the roster of soldiers. Everything was committed to memory and, nothing could stop her headache. The thought of facing Chu Beijie in Kanbu sent a throbbing pain into her head.

If the famous Bei Mo general, Ze Yin, hadn’t been defending Kanbu all along, perhaps the city would have long collapsed under Chu Beijie’s ferocious attack.

Could she really fight against him?

Each roll of the carriage wheel brought her closer to that man. She imagined Chu Beijie’s majestic aura on the battlefield.

Pingting shook her head. Stop thinking about him. Stop thinking about him.

Taking a deep breath of cool air, she slowly opened her eyes, the twinkle in them dimming to fierce determination. The battle in Kanbu was no longer a war between Dong Lin and Bei Mo but a contest between Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting.

Did she really want to win? Pingting questioned herself as she gazed at the intimidating Army Command Representation beside her.

The carriage suddenly jolted to a stop, interrupting Pingting’s thoughts. She heard the familiar voice of a general, Han Shuxi, who was outside. “We’ve arrived in Kanbu now, My Lady. You may come off the carriage now. The main general has come to greet you personally.”

Opening the carriage curtains, the first thing that caught her eye was the tall city walls, badly damaged and charred from smoke. It told her everything about the brutality that occurred in the past few days. Pingting slowly got out of the carriage, her eyes moving from the wall to the parade of people that specifically came to welcome her.

The leader of the group was covered in yellow dust and his beard was like a weed. Although his beard covered half of his face, his eyes were alight with determination. One could easily tell he was the type of person who never surrendered to things he thought weren't right.

Pingting revealed a shy smile and bowing. "You must be Main General Ze Yin. Having such a high ranking soldier personally welcome me is too much of an honour for a girl like me."

Ze Yin shot forward and stopped Pingting from completely bowing, saying, "My Lady is here to be the main military advisor so there is no need to be so formal around us, your subordinates."

Lowering his voice, he added, "The King has already sent messengers here and Ze Yin will assist My Lady in every way possible. Shall we continue inside the city walls?"

Pingting nodded in agreement and took out Yangfeng's letter. Ze Yin instantly recognized Yangfeng's handwriting. A warm smile took over as he took it.

Other generals also came by and saluted, reporting their names and ranks.

The group of people entered a heavily guarded defence area. Ze Yin was not just being friendly to Pingting. He saw her as a proper advisor, even giving his sleeping quarters to her.

Inside the sleeping quarters, most things were either blue or black. It was evident that the original owner was bold and generous. A huge dark bow hung on the wall. Topographic maps of Kanbu were spread all over the bench. From what Pingting deducted, Ze Yin had continued to try to form a plan in defeating the enemy.

Pingting spun around, noticing that the room had a simple but effective layout, feeling that she understood Ze Yin a lot more. If it weren't for his beautiful wife at home, he wouldn't appear so elegant in public because elegance wasn't his style.

It was really God's work that a Gui Le woman as elite as Yangfeng had fallen in love with such a bulky man.

Ze Yin asked the other accompanying generals to stay outside for a while. "My

Lady, are you satisfied with this place?” He asked. “Time is limited so I’m afraid My Lady will have to bear with it for a while. If the colours in here are too dark, you can get one of the serving soldiers to bring in bright coloured rugs or cloth though they might not be able to find any.”

Pingting saw his calm expression but knew that he was still worried about the military situation. She laughed brightly, “Main General, you’re too kind. The army is top priority at the moment. We don’t have time to be worrying about minor things like this. Please tell me about the most recent situation; we’ll talk before strategising.”

Ze Yin was waiting for this all along. He beckoned to a seat and said, “Please sit, My Lady.”

The two sat. Ze Yin’s face became serious. In a low voice he reported, “Thirteen days ago, my army and I retreated to Kanbu, and Chu Beijie decided to siege us. Thanks to Kanbu’s high and thick walls, defending so far has been fairly easy, but even so, many soldiers die just to force the Dong Lin soldiers back. Dong Lin obviously has the advantage of weapons and soldiers. Even I don’t have the confidence of completely defeating them. Chu Beijie is indeed worthy of his reputation as he has repeatedly seen through my tactics.”

“I have something I’d like to ask Main General. I hope you won’t mind.” Pingting continued, “The defence line of Bei Mo’s boundaries has been tight with Main General in control. How come the Dong Lin army broke through the defence so fast that the whole Bei Mo army retreated to Kanbu, the last defence barrier?”

This question surprised Ze Yin and his eyes hardened as he looked directly at Pingting. He did not see ignorance in her glistening eyes. Then he cried out, mainly in awe. “If Yangfeng hadn’t mentioned her best friend so many times, I would have considered this question to be a serious blow to my pride. My Lady’s question basically sums it up. You see, my army suffered massive defeat and were forced to retreat to Kanbu. The reason was not because we were outnumbered. The Dong Lin army was estimated to have one hundred thousand soldiers, but there were only around seventy-thousand. The military advisor’s estimates were the ultimate cause of failure.”

Ze Yin didn't notice that Pingting's expression had changed. He stood up and studied the maps of Kanbu again, remembering things as he looked at them. "I, Ze Yin, am probably one of the most famous army generals in Bei Mo, but even I had no idea what superior was until I met Chu Beijie. Not only has he seen through several of my tactics, he personally leads the army and fights well. Once, at the front line, in three slashes, he injured one of my best soldiers, Menchu. This had a negative impact on my soldiers for they lost confidence against such invincible figure. That's why we lost."

From his words, Pingting heard the fear of the soldiers and couldn't help but imagine Chu Beijie in the midst of a thousand horses and men, cutting down a fierce warrior in three graceful moves. It took a while for her to snap out of it, before calmly saying, "Main General, you don't need to lose heart. Although Chu Beijie is a scary person, even he has been kept outside the Kanbu walls for the past thirteen days, right?"

Ze Yin didn't immediately reply at this. After what seemed like forever he said, "I read Yangfeng's letter before coming in here. As My Lady knows Chu Beijie a lot better than me, you probably have a better understanding of this situation. However, everyone knows that once Kanbu is captured, the Dong Lin army will immediately reach Bei Yali and then we will become imprisoned slaves in our own country. So although everyone clearly knows that Chu Beijie will win, we are still desperately fighting back."

"Good thinking, Main General." Pingting nodded in agreement, "Retreating back to Kanbu gave your soldiers more confidence as the high walls gives the defensive side a bigger advantage. However, if these walls can't force the Dong Lin army to retreat, they will still capture this place sooner or later." Being out on the battlefield and surviving in the Royal Residence were two very different skills and the second one, Pingting was very capable of. The former was much more difficult, as one of the two competitors was much more advantaged than the other. The thought of Chu Beijie having everything he needed couldn't help but make Pingting sigh in disappointment. He controlled an army of the finest soldiers while she led a group of terrified soldiers out onto the battlefield.

Nevertheless, she felt a faint edge of pride. *On the battlefield, who else in the world can oppose Chu Beijie?*

She allowed herself to think of him for a few more moments before remembering that she was still in a discussion with Ze Yin. She stopped staring into space. Her face neutralised like a real military advisor, whose eyes never wavered.

In two or three sentences, Pingting had brought out Ze Yin's worries that he had to look at her more than once in the eye. "My Lady, you are right. Chu Beijie had tried out direct attacks on the first few days and both sides were severely injured. From the tenth day, Dong Lin's army stopped moving and went quiet. I reckon he's waiting for the time when my army drops guard, to prevent fewer casualties on their side."

"No." Pingting pursed her lips slightly, not frowning. She lifted her chin, looking serious and articulated her words one-by-one. "If Chu Beijie stopped attacking, he must have found better way to capture Kanbu. Knowing his calculating methods, his way of attack would be shockingly surprising and the impact would be unpredictable. It'll easily rip apart the Kanbu's inner defence system."

Ze Yin's expression was doubtful. "Is that even possible?"

Pingting didn't bother answering this question. She asked another instead. "Did you send any soldiers to spy on the Dong Lin army?"

"Lots but Chu Beijie takes note of these things and often sends huge troops to scout for spies around his residence. The spies can't stay too long and only know that the enemy army hasn't done anything yet." Ze Yin sighed, "Those who get a little bit more than usual end up never coming back."

"That must be right because Chu Beijie is already secretly carrying out his plan," Pingting analysed. "Main General, as the main military advisor, only tell the top commanding generals what we've discussed. Do not tell anyone else."

Ze Yin readily agreed. "Don't worry, My Lady. The people who you saw today are all the generals I trust and only they know that My Lady is the new advisor. Only me and the escort, Ruohan, know your real name, but we'll all call you 'My Lady'. The King clearly stated the last Order."

So this was why he, the main general, was calling her by the title, 'My Lady'.

Pingting nodded to show assurance. Her eyes drifted towards the door, onto the pebbled footpath out on the foyer. Quietly, she said, “Well, let’s go and see the wall.”

Up on Kanbu’s magnificent city walls, Pingting saw the plains and mountains covered by the atmosphere of war. It was truly everywhere. Ze Yin stood up and pointed south-east, saying, “That’s the Dong Lin army camp.”

Her heart started to thump loudly.

“Dong Lin army camp huh...” Pingting tried to focus on the camp in the distance, but it was too far away. She couldn’t even see the banners flapping in the air. She couldn’t see the chiselled features of Chu Beijie either.

Guess what Chu Beijie? Pingting came.

Pingting couldn’t escape so she came instead.

Translation Notes

- Who else can oppose Chu Beijie in this world?: Probably an ambiguous statement. Maybe she thinks that only she can oppose Chu Beijie correctly and/or thinks that she (herself) can’t oppose him and likes his figure of “an unopposed man”.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 18

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch18

Every second was crucial to finding out Chu Beijie's secret plan. Pingting wasn't interested in rewards; she simply wanted the rights to control the Bei Mo army from the King so that she had easier accessibility to command the army during difficult times. Apart from the few highest ranking commanders who briefly saw her upon arrival, she didn't appear in public a second time.

The meetings were held in the room Ze Yin had moved out for Pingting. He was the only one who had discussed battle tactics with her. Being also a good friend of his wife, her unknown background was disregarded. Ze Yin had long earned Pingting's approval. He was more than just helpful.

The Bei Mo army's current situation was not caused by Ze Yin's lack of ability but because of Chu Beijie's wit.

"What are thinking, My Lady?" Ze Yin finally broke the silence. He continued with informing the latest report. "This time, we've lost several dozens of frontline spies. They retrieved only insignificant news. What a waste."

Pingting mentally processed the report but didn't answer. She rolled open the map and aimlessly stroked across before stopping to point at the bottom corner on the right. Frowning, she muttered, "The South is full of dense forests, but that's all. Do you know why Chu Beijie sends troops everyday over there?"

Ze Yin gathered around the map and also frowned as if in deep a thought but only shook his head. "It's impossible to surround and attack from the back of Kanbu by going through that forest. It's not only a waste of time but also a massive waste of power. The forest is pretty dangerous as well, complete with

poisonous snakes. The army could be diminished by more than a half before they even reach Kanbu.”

Pingting flicked through a journal of Kanbu’s battle history when a sudden thought washed over. “Is there a similar journal about the surrounding, dense forest?”

“That forest is dark, dangerous, and scary – there aren’t many people willing to go there.” Ze Yin continued, “But one of the previous head guards of Kanbu was dedicated and once collected data on the topography of the area around Kanbu. They have it preserved. There might be something about that forest in those books, but I’m not sure how detailed the data is. I’ll retrieve it if My Lady wants.”

He personally went to another library to get a set of very old, dusty-looking books and placed them on the table.

Pingting hoped that news of the Dong Lin King’s unconsciousness would reach Chu Beijie soon before his yet to be predicted plan was in action. If not, and Pingting couldn’t stop his plan, it meant the surrender of Kanbu and eventually the conquest of the Bei Mo country.

As of now, Ze Yin’s once indestructible impression could no longer be recovered, and the only spark of hope for Bei Mo was Chu Beijie’s infamous enemy, Pingting.

What bad luck — he would have been okay if his enemy wasn’t the frustratingly invincible Chu Beijie, right?

Pingting realised the sudden change in the atmosphere. She stared at Ze Yin as understanding flickered into her eyes. “How many days has it been since you closed your eyes? A balanced lifestyle is needed to fight properly. You ought to get some rest.”

“I’m fine.”

Pingting chuckled and softened her words, “Well, General, I won’t force you, but you’re being manipulated by Chu Beijie. You see, his favourite tactic is scaring the opposition to prevent them from sleeping, then attacking when everyone is too tired. Often, the defending team has already collapsed from fatigue by the time he decides to attack.”

Ze Yin nodded in understanding, “My Lady’s right. Too much anxiety will damage our energy.” The corners of his mouth twitched into a bitter smile. “Honestly speaking, ever since fighting against Chu Beijie, I haven’t slept properly for ages. Tonight, I’ll sleep and get more confidence to fight against the Dong Lin army.”

He stood up. “I’ll check the soldier’s sleeping quarters before going to bed.” Then, he left the room.

Meanwhile in the Dong Lin army’s sleeping quarters, everyone had long gone to bed and was deep in their dreams, except for a few nightly guards.

No one was afraid of being attacked at night by the Bei Mo army since their last attempt at surprise attack had failed miserably. They couldn’t possibly be prepared for such sacrifice again.

No one worried whether conquering Kanbu was possible or not, and no one cared about the final victor either. Under the command of the best commander in the world and with the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s flag flapping in the wind, they felt sure that all of the instructions given were the best course of action.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei’s flag, at the moment, was firmly wedged in the central command tent, flapping loudly from the wind blowing from the dense forest of a hundred acres.

Light came from within the central command tent. Chu Beijie wasn’t asleep yet. A set of armour made of gold hung against the wall, occasionally reflecting the flickering candle flame. Moran stood quietly at the side, waiting for Chu Beijie to speak.

Chu Beijie hadn’t said a word ever since getting the latest report from their spy. Before long, Chu Beijie placed the report back into the file. Expressionless, he asked, “Who could possibly be their new advisor, who’s rumoured to be a woman?”

A certain name shot into Moran’s thoughts. He took a step back and replied, “The name and history of the new military advisor are considered the most confidential information of our enemy. Our spies might not be able to uncover such secrets.”

Chu Beijie sat down, studying Moran before calmly saying, "Our guess may be right."

Moran reacted to this by raising his head to meet Chu Beijie's eyes with an alarmed expression. He quickly collected himself together, hesitantly asking, "If it really is that person, what do you plan to do, Duke?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"We can't be sure whether their advisor is her or not, so what if the original plan..."

Chu Beijie waved his hand. "Moran, no need to worry. Tell the spy that there's no need to research the new military advisor any further. If it's really Bai Pingting, she should be able to realise my plan before it's too late."

But Moran argued, "If it's really her and she doesn't realise Duke's plan, wouldn't she die with the rest of the Bei Mo army in Kanbu?" Moran felt Chu Beijie's knife-sharp gaze on him. He quickly closed his mouth, refusing to continue.

"I don't know though..." Chu Beijie seemed a bit worried as well. He rose and gazed towards the tent flap. He held it and admired the moon. Taking a deep breath of the cold night air, he finally managed to calm his thumping heart down. There was newfound determination in his eyes as he whispered, "If she didn't have such skill and intelligence, would she be worthy of my love?" He turned, reassured his subordinate and chuckled. "It seems you still have your doubts. You can tell me."

Moran knew that she was his weakness, but war was approaching and the main general must always have a clear, unwavering sense of purpose. He asked, "Doesn't Duke want to capture Pingting alive?"

"So Moran thinks I want to capture Bai Pingting for revenge?" Chu Beijie smiled, "Remember this. No commander would stop after defeat for that would be a costly mistake. I want to capture Bai Pingting alive only because I respect her." He pushed away the files on his desk and pushed open the worn map, thinking of the only woman he couldn't forget. "If it wasn't respect, why else would I want her to be captured alive?"

“Has Duke ever considered...” Moran’s eyebrows were creased again, “...that even if she figures out Duke’s plan, she might not be able to do anything about it?”

“You’re wrong. If she can figure it out, she’ll definitely outsmart it.” Chu Beijie’s expression didn’t change as he said, “When the sun rises from the East, I shall see if she’s worthier of my love than any other woman in this world. Well, well Pingting, if you really are in Kanbu, don’t disappoint me.”

Back in Kanbu, Ze Yin had just fallen asleep.

However, his sleep was short lived as it was soon interrupted by a loud thump at the door. The one knocking could only be that one person, someone who he couldn’t complain about despite it being three thirty in the morning.

“I know what his plan is.” Either excitement or worry had made Pingting’s white cheeks into a pale pink. She entered the room, lit a candle on the table, and opened an aged scroll. “Thank goodness I read some other old references after reading the books left by one of the previous head guards, or else our army would have suffered massive casualties and immeasurable damage. General, please look here.”

Ze Yin followed her pearly white finger. His thick eyebrows rose slightly. “Poisonous wasps?”

“These wasps can only be found deep in the mountains surrounding Kanbu; their nest should be where the forests are most compact. Their poison is extremely potent – just one light stab and even a wild bull would collapse. I’m familiar with medicine and had once heard about these wasps. Thanks to the reports General gave me, I realised that something was strange and now I’ve finally found the reason after spending all night flicking through books and scrolls.” Pingting noticed the look of bewilderment and doubtful expression on Ze Yin’s face. “Is something wrong, General?”

“My Lady guessed that Chu Beijie would use poisonous wasps to attack my army, right?” Ze Yin continued, “It’s easier said than done. I know about these wasps. Although these wasps are strong enough to poison our entire defence force, it would still be a hard task to accomplish. For one, where would you get all those wasps?”

Pingting had long thought about this. She calmly replied, "That's why Chu Beijie has been sending troops into the forest. That's where the wasps' nests would be and only there can he collect enough for this plan."

"Chu Beijie may be strong, but he's not invincible. He's not from Bei Mo, so how could he know and manipulate those wasps?"

Pingting sighed. "General is still underestimating Chu Beijie even at this time. His army of ten thousand men and horses has certainly created chaos around here, so it wouldn't be unusual that his soldiers have died after being stung by some disturbed wasps. Once Chu Beijie learned of such a powerful, natural weapon, he would definitely send people to research the wasps' habits. That's why his army hasn't been attacking recently."

Ze Yin still shook his head but didn't say anything.

Pingting carried on. "In the book, it says that poisonous wasps are very sensitive to the sap of the Sanhua tree. They can sense the sap from a faraway distance. This sap also makes their poison even stronger. There are huge patches of Sanhua tree in the East and West side of the Kanbu city walls. Say, what if Chu Beijie really wants to use these wasps to attack us? He must have ordered his soldiers to find these trees and chop them down. Then he will use the branches of the Sanhua tree, which is full of sap, as arrows and fire them from a long distance toward Kanbu, while releasing a huge number of wasps. The defending force will definitely be diminished to less than a half. When the wasps move away as the sap in the arrows slowly dries up, conquering Bei Mo's last line of defence would be no problem."

Ze Yin heard the urgency in Pingting's voice. He couldn't help but be uncertain of whether to believe or not. "I'll immediately get someone to check whether the Sanhua trees on the East and West side have been cut down."

He talked briefly to his personal assistant, who would pass on his commands, before turning back to her. "If it's really like that, Chu Beijie's plan is really a risk and really unbelievable, but Ze Yin still doesn't understand." He hesitated, "Please don't be offended by Ze Yin's directness. This plan is still rather... unusual, so I am wondering how confident My Lady is about it."

"How confident?" Pingting was surprised by this question. She quickly hid her

excitement over uncovering the enemy's plan. She gripped the handle of her seat. It was several moments later before she broke into a smile. "If I said that I'm sure of such an unbelievable, strange trick, General would definitely laugh and won't believe me. I don't know why, really. When I thought of this wasp plan, I was sure it would be something Chu Beijie would do." She forced a tight-lipped smile at Ze Yin. "If Bai Pingting couldn't figure out Chu Beijie's train of thought, what use could she be to Bei Mo?"

The candlelight in the room flickered while moths danced.

The bright moon hung high in the sky, casting silvery light throughout the city walls. Both inside and outside were full of soldiers dreaming of their homes.

Their lives depended on the decisions made by their commanders, their right and wrong guesses. It was like a cruel game.

And her opponent just had to be him.

Pingting pushed her hair to one side, remembering his strong hands slowly stroking her silky hair while saying "This is mine." with a small smile.

She had never known such a painful feeling before.

"Does General know what I want to do the most at the moment?"

"Ze Yin has no idea."

Pingting pressed her lips together and smiled. "Same as General. I need a good rest." She rubbed her chest, above her sore heart, with a finger. "But then again, who can rest properly after meeting Chu Beijie?"

She wanted to sigh but choked the urge away. Main advisors shouldn't sigh. She considered herself a bad one because of that.

Under the moon, everything became clear. Ze Yin regretted his impoliteness that saddened Pingting. He coughed and then changed the subject. "There is something else I must know. Is there a cure to the poison?"

Pingting shrugged. "That's another reason why I'm sure Chu Beijie would use the wasps. Even if the wasps' poison enters the blood stream, the person can die, but if he or she first drinks a mixture of herbs that neutralises the Sanhua tree sap, they will be resistant to the poison. In the past, according to this book,

those who entered the forests always drank this mixture beforehand. If all the Dong Lin soldiers drink this mixture, they won't have to worry about getting stung."

"Really?" Ze Yin furrowed his brow even further and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"If the Dong Lin army released the poisonous wasps during the fight, our soldiers would try to run away from the wasps therefore they won't defend properly. Those who continue to defend will be stung."

At this time of unease, the General's personal assistant returned. He was edgy as he came into the room, calling out. "General, the Sanhua trees on the East and West sides have been cut!"

Ze Yin turned towards him, and in a loud voice, he demanded, "How on Earth did those trees get cut down without us noticing?"

His personal assistant shook his head in confusion, but he knew that the current situation wasn't good. "The forests on the East and West side are from the city walls. When General told us to defend from the walls with full power, the troops stationed there had retreated. Dong Lin must have been going there since then, secretly cutting down those trees and happily leaving afterwards so we didn't realise anything."

Pingting interrupted, "Did you take inventory of how many trees were cut down? How long would it have taken them?"

"The stumps have begun to dry so it must have been yesterday."

Ze Yin and Pingting exchanged a look that said, "As expected". Grinding his teeth, he commanded, "Pass on this command: prepare a huge pan for making medicine and take some of the best soldiers to cut down all of the remaining Sanhua trees."

"Wait!" Pingting held out a hand and hurriedly explained, "It's likely that Chu Beijie has some troops stationed nearby, waiting for us to fall for some trap near those trees, not to mention that there's not enough time to make the medicine even if enough trees can be cut down. General, it's nearly morning." She pointed at the window that displayed grey skies.

“Chu Beijie might have not guessed that we know of his poisonous wasp plan. He might not have collected enough wasps anyway.” Ze Yin stared at the sky and lowered his voice, “As long as he doesn’t plan to attack today, we would not have to prepare too much to win the war.”

Pingting sighed. “Chu Beijie would never make such a risky mistake. A day and a half is enough to cut down enough trees, make arrows with the sap, and concoct the resistant medicine. The Sanhua trees were cut yesterday. He’ll definitely attack today.”

Ze Yin shook violently at this, his eyes widened. It seemed like ages before words formed in his mouth. “Then, what should we do?”

Pingting didn’t immediately reply. She instead opened the half-opened window. She closed her eyes and slowly breathed in the fresh morning air. It was almost as if she wanted the oxygen to circulate once through her tired body before she casually opened her eyes again.

In a commanding tone, she said, “No need to worry General. Ever since leaving Bei Yali, I’ve always known that there’d be a day like this. No one who has gone against Chu Beijie has had a successful outcome before, unless he pretended to be weak.”

Thinking back to Gui Le’s ‘victory’ that year made her chest ached. Pingting couldn’t help but stare into the distance for a little longer. Finally, she swung back around chuckled, “Pingting would be delighted to know if there is still a playable qin with all strings still attached.”

“A qin?”

“Yes. I plan to play somewhere up high where Chu Beijie can hear me play.”

Ze Yin’s expression instantly changed at this. He shook his head vigorously. “I know that My Lady has an unusual relationship with Chu Beijie, but this concerns two armies – it’s serious. My Lady would be easily seen from all directions from a high building. You will be open to his arrows, not to mention the poisonous wasps. His super accurate shots are certainly no lie.”

“I’m the main advisor. If General disobeys, I’ll have to force you to agree.” Pingting lifted the symbol of her authority. She grinned playfully but stopped

when she noticed Ze Yin's solemn expression. "General was asked by Yangfeng to look after Pingting. Why fret? If Chu Beijie is willing to shoot Pingting, maybe, it'd mean the release that promises freedom." When she finished, she strode out of the room.

In the Dong Lin army, the soldiers had long been awake. Everyone was taking turns to drink a medicine that didn't taste too good from a huge pan. The troops stood in an orderly fashion, swords in their hands.

Several dozen lumpy, leather bags were distributed out to the other soldiers by Chu Beijie's personal assistants. The buzzing sound never stopped. A separate troop was tightly wrapped in clothing, having just completed the task of making arrows from the branches of full Sanhua tree sap. Their next task was to shoot these arrows towards Kanbu in order to attract the wasps and strengthen their poison.

It was likely that there were traces of the luring Sanhua tree sap on the soldiers, and although they had a share of the medicine, being stung is still painful thus they decided to wrap themselves up in clothing. They covered as much of their hands, feet, and face as they could.

Chu Beijie and Moran stood outside, waiting for the other generals to finish their check up and confirming for zero errors before going back up to the command platform.

"When my soldiers attack the city, where will she be?" Chu Beijie asked, frowning once he was on the platform.

Only Moran understood among the crowd what Chu Beijie was thinking. He knew that the Duke was troubled. The best thing for Moran though was to pretend not to know and stand with the others, waiting for Chu Beijie's next command.

After a long pause, the crowd still heard no command from Chu Beijie and began to exchange confused glances with each other. No one dared to interrupt Chu Beijie's thinking; they all just glared at Moran.

As second in command, Moran pretended to be thick-headed and called, "Duke, it's about time."

“Good,” Chu Beijie lifted his head from his daze and returned the gazes of his trusted commanders. He calmly smiled and said, “It’s been a while since I felt such anticipation, but today is an exception. Maybe this attack on Kanbu will be a lot more interesting than I predicted. Maybe it’ll be the end or perhaps a new beginning. Everything... depends on whether their new advisor is worthy enough for me to go all out against.” Eyes flashing, he shouted, “Let’s go!”

Everyone shouted “Yes!” as his command rippled through the crowd, lifting everyone’s fighting spirit.

The mighty Dong Lin army, after a brief truce, under the influence of the powerful Duke of Zhen-Bei, has finally begun its attack against Kanbu.

Translation Notes

- Sanhua trees: Completely fictional.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 19

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The war drums rumbled against the ground.

The Dong Lin army was already stationed at the foot of Kanbu in orderly rows. The colour of blood seemed to be reflected in their eyes as their weapons flashed. They were ready to kill – just waiting for their commander.

With the command flag in the air and the sound of the whistle, the mighty army parted for their commander to pass through.

Pingting observed through squinted eyes, somewhere in a tall building.

On his horse, Dong Lin's main general, Chu Beijie carried his head held high. His confident figure looked more than ready to battle, his infamous sword was hanging by his waist and bow held against his horse.

He made his way through no man's land to the Kanbu gates when he suddenly glanced up. She glanced down and their eyes happened to meet, causing sparks. Immense excitement raged through both of them.

His army of a thousand horses and men wasn't afraid of anything, yet she continued to breezily sit inside the palanquin.

When Pingting felt the electric but fiery spark, her body seemed to have gone limp like energy had been drained from her limbs or as if her body was completely dry of blood. Her vision was temporarily blurred and her uncoordinated body was only stretched after clutching against a stone pillar.

Looking down, she couldn't see the soldiers standing at the Kanbu walls. She could only see those eyes which seemed to burn right through her.

Chu Beijie always made her lose her will, energy, and concentration. With a wry smile, she realised that she couldn't wait to see every inch of him once more. Little did she know that her body unconsciously took two steps forward.

"Be careful My Lady!" Cautioned Ruohan, the bodyguard ordered to stay by her.

Jolted out of her trance, she realised that she was standing at the edge. A few more steps could have sent her plummeting to her death.

"My Lady?"

Pingting came fully back to her senses. Right, she was the main military advisor. Kanbu's future, Bei Mo's future, even Yangfeng and her child's future were all in her hands.

The glow returned to her black pupils. She took brisk footsteps away from the edge to sit in front of the prepared ancient qin.

Calming her hands and spreading incense, she had done everything.

Pingting softly directed, "Pass on this command: continue to follow the plan."

"Yes."

From below, Chu Beijie's gaze never left the elegant figure in the palanquin.

She wasn't afraid of anything, just as he'd expected. Her indifference and bold movements were unique.

Moran finished his rounds before approaching Chu Beijie, whispering, "Duke, it really was her."

Looking up into the high palanquin, you could see her fine figure.

"She guessed it all right." Chu Beijie sighed.

"Should we immediately release the poisonous wasps?"

Chu Beijie was about to reply when he frowned.

Ping!

The sound of a qin floated down from the palanquin. Just one sound, crisp yet steady, moved the crowd like a needle striking their hearts.

Chu Beijie's strong gaze that could silence his army easily made a complicated expression towards the palanquin. His eyes were narrowed as he muttered, "The string broke."

Ping! Another sound was heard, this time resonating even louder than the one before.

"The second string."

Ping!

"The third string...that's your plan to force me in retreat? My Little Pingting." Chu Beijie eyed the figure while understanding flooded through his once dumbstruck expression. He held up one hand and called, "Pass on this order: retreat ten kilometres."

"Retreat?" Moran was shocked, almost horrified.

The other commanders exchanged looks then looked back at their main commander.

"Retreat." Almost spitting out the word, Chu Beijie looked at his woman one last time before turning his horse away.

"Duke has commanded, retreat!"

"Pass command: Retreat!"

"Retreat! Retreat!"

With their thundering footsteps, the entire Dong Lin army retreated like a tide.

Chu Beijie was at the very front of the retreating soldiers, his expression like usual, not conveying any emotion.

Chu Beijie rode for a moment then slowed to a canter, beside Moran.

Chu Beijie had galloped for some time before his pace slackened, letting Moran catch up.

"If we were to attack, Pingting would use her body to defend the city. If we were to release the wasps, she wouldn't be able to live."

"That was her plan?" Moran carefully chose his words, "In other words, if Duke wishes Pingting to be alive and safe, the poisonous wasps plan won't be used."

She really is too brave, betting on her life like that. If Duke didn't care so much about the past, wouldn't she have lost her life over nothing?"

"That basically sums up that you know that I'm not as good as Pingting." Chu Beijie laughed. "I would never have commanded the continuation of the attack. She is the main advisor of the Bei Mo army at the moment, the hope of the Bei Mo army, yet she doesn't hesitate to sacrifice her body. This has one effect – it gives her soldiers courage. If I were to kill Pingting in front of the crowd and continue the attack on the Bei Mo army in hope to conquer Kanbu, her army would want to avenge her death and will attack us without reservation. Our loss then would be unimaginable. An army that is ruled by intense anger cannot be controlled by any normal strong force therefore I concluded that Pingting's death would mean Dong Lin's defeat."

Moran immediately understood and he lowered his head, sighing. "Not only that, but if Duke did continue, it would give everyone the impression that you had used poison against a defenceless girl. It would ruin your reputation as the best commander and damage our army's pride. The after effects could be even worse."

Chu Beijie looked at Moran admiringly for a few seconds, before softly saying, "Although her counter-tactic was more psychological, I am relieved. If she didn't completely trust in me, she wouldn't have bet her life and use this tactic."

Moran could hear that Chu Beijie was in a good mood, so he laughed. "That's what they call 'Damming.' I mean, Duke promptly reacted and quickly told the army to retreat back ten kilometres. Although there are many men in this world, there aren't many people who'd easily give up a city for a woman." After laughing he sighed again as there was still something he wanted to know.

"Duke, please be angry with Moran for his bluntness, but there is still something Moran is unsure about."

Of course Chu Beijie could guess what his second in command was thinking. The corners of his mouth lifted into a grin. "Even if there wasn't a valid excuse, I would have never continued to attack the city. Losing Pingting would be more than just a lifetime of regret. A mere Kanbu could never compare to the loss of half a strand of her hair."

Moran had guessed the true intention of his Master long ago but hearing it himself made him feel a rush of pride for the man's honour. "Miss Pingting sure is one lucky woman to deserve such love from Duke. But, what should our army do? Stop and rest when we got to the ten kilometre mark?"

Chu Beijie had already come up with a plan as he gazed ahead. "In three hours, attack again."

"Attack Kanbu?" Moran was dumbfounded. "Even if we don't use the wasps, as long as Pingting stays in that palanquin, none of us are able to attack. Any stray arrow would kill her."

"Well Moran, you know that I'm not as good as Pingting, but you should also know that at the same time, Pingting is not as good as me." Chu Beijie's confidence was obvious when he continued, "She'd only use that tactic once. The woman I like would never be stupid enough to continuously bet on her body every time our army attacks. I can assure you, she would have already thought of another plan by the time our army attacks again."

He tossed his head back and roared in laughter.

"With her here, this Kanbu battle really has become much more thrilling. It's certainly the most nerve-wracking battle, I, Chu Beijie have ever been in."

However, Moran looked as if he had a headache. "So, Duke has found a worthy opponent and victory is uncertain?"

"Do you remember the sword I left in honour of the five year treaty?"

"Yes, it was Duke's favourite 'Parting Soul'."

"I must win this war as the price for the future of the Duchess of Zhen-Bei." Chu Beijie seemed to be thinking something as he said, "Although Pingting is clever, her soul has departed due to me, Chu Beijie."

With one last flick of the whip, they were gone like the wind.

Three hours later, the Dong Lin army was ready once more, their confidence even stronger than before. They were inspired by their main commander's invincible figure and they were ready to win the last defensive attack against Kanbu.

Their flag noisily flapped in the air.

Chu Beijie's expression was neutral. He was sitting on his horse as he calmly observed Kanbu.

A spy, who was sent, came with a report. "Duke, there are absolutely no soldiers in Kanbu. They must have escaped!"

This news rippled through the other generals and even Chu Beijie had to frown.

"Check again!"

"Yes!"

"Moran," Chu Beijie picked his named out from the crowd, "Explain."

Moran thought hard, then roughly explained, "The most important thing at the moment is to understand the movements of the Bei Mo army. If they are heading onwards Bei Yali, then we could easily catch up. If they have gone around Kanbu and are heading for the southern forests, then it'd be pretty bad."

At this moment, the spy came again and panted in a somewhat high voice, "Duke, the entire Bei Mo army has entered the forest!"

Every one of the generals paled when they realised the intention of the Bei Mo main advisor. Although it was a bit risky, it was the best tactic they could possible do at this time.

"Once the Bei Mo army enters the dense forest, they can attack our supplies at any time, surrounding us by breaking off places we could retreat to and force the back-up soldiers we've been receiving from the King away. Even if we continue through Kanbu to Bei Yali, we'll be on our own."

Chu Beijie's expression was very serious when he abruptly laughed.

"You had only just ruined my poisonous wasps plan when you immediately think of using the forests next. Well, well Pingting. How am I supposed to not love and respect you? You know that this tactic won't stop my army. At most, it would only hold up for a few more days... so just what are you planning?"

After laughing, his expression was thoughtful once more.

“General Shenwei, take your troops and head for Kanbu.”

He waved his hands and someone passed a command flag to General Shenwei.

A frosty smile played on Chu Beijie’s lips, “I’m going to take ten thousand of the best soldiers to stop her army in the forest.”

“Please reconsider, Duke. The Bei Mo army is approximately fifty thousand in number. Even if it’s ten thousand of the best soldiers, it should be impossible to win.”

“Ten thousand is enough,” With all his arrogance, he chuckled. “How could you win the best woman’s heart without skill? My dear Pingting, I will make you lose in a way that you won’t have any regrets.”

The group of a thousand soldiers began their chase to find the Bei Mo army, towards the forests that covered several hectares, a place where not many had explored before.

Translation Notes

- Damming: This word is stolen from a chess tactic (not that I play chess of course). It’s probably not the correct translation and probably more of an inference from me. But it does sort of make sense. Damming means to cut off lines of support or attack for one or more pieces and thereby punching large holes in the attack or support chain. From my understanding (which is too basic to win a proper game), it’s something like moving/forcing the opposition’s piece (usually by sacrifice) to a more advantageous place for you. That opposition’s piece is also generally an important one for attack or defence. Pingting “damns” (blocks) Chu Beijie’s attempt at attack by sacrificing her body. If Chu Beijie was mean enough to kill her, then all the wasps would attack her (because the Sanhua arrows and maybe because she has some Sanhua near herself too), instead of attacking the Bei Mo army. This means that the attack chain is basically useless and the after-effects are pretty bad, as stated in the novel. Chu Beijie is nice and retreats this time, meaning there is no use for their attack chain right now and it therefore dissolves. This buys the Bei Mo army more time for a proper counterattack. Whatever Chu Beijie decides is advantageous to

Pingting's side, the Bei Mo army. This was probably more of an "Art of War" reference (famous military treatise), but that's virtually impossible for me to understand. :/

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 20

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Chu Beijie led his troops through the forests and chose a somewhat open area to take a short break. He sent orders to get the best of his spies to check the movements of the Bei Mo army.

Together with Moran, they put up the central command tent and began studying the map.

“The forest surrounds the Kanbu for several hectares all around. Lots of places have yet to be explored. This means that the Bei Mo army couldn’t have gone in too much. The best places for them to stay are here, here, and there.” Chu Beijie’s finger moved, respectively pointing out the three mountain symbols on the map.

Moran agreed. “The Bei Mo army is approximately fifty thousand, so it’s very unlikely for them to fully disappear in this forest in such a short time. Our spies can definitely find out their location. However, if they really are living up high in the mountain to defend, this war won’t be resolved any time soon.”

Chu Beijie smiled at this and warmly asked, “Does Moran know why I chose to have ten thousand soldiers with me?”

With this hint, Moran’s eyes lit up with understanding. “Duke wants them to attack first?”

“The Bei Mo army and my army have been attacking each other for ages without result. They need a big victory to heighten everyone’s spirits.” Chu Beijie’s cheerful smile was unreadable. He turned back to the map and pointed at a tall mountain in the Southeast direction.

“If my analysis is correct, Pingting should have stationed troops there.”

“Duke just mentioned that only three mountains were possible and why is Duke so confident that they’d be on that mountain?”

“Although there are three possibilities, this place is the one that suits Pingting the most.”

Moran was about to ask again when a voice from outside the tent called, “Duke, I found out where the Bei Mo army is.”

“Come in and speak.”

The spy came in and reported, “The Bei Mo army is currently stationed on Mount Dianqing. It is the most dangerous, and according to the map, there’s a strong little river flowing nearby which seems to be the source of the several streams around here.”

Surprisingly, he then asked, “If Moran was the Bei Mo main military advisor, how would you attack my ten thousand soldiers?”

Moran was familiar with the battlefield and so he knew the answer.

“One of the basics of war is to secure a lodge near a water source so that soldiers and their horses can have easier access to water. If I were the Bei Mo main advisor, I would first find the source of the main streams, then add a poison that can diminish the enemy’s fighting spirit.”

“This plan could only work once thought as it has to be before I understand the geography. Pingting must have thought that I’m usually too busy with the soldiers and don’t understand these forests well. I always take notice of the geography when I go to a place though. I study as many maps as I can beforehand.” Chu Beijie couldn’t help but grin. “I predict she’ll poison the water tonight. Then, her army will be sent down and surround my ten thousand soldiers.”

Moran studied the expression on Chu Beijie’s face and realised he had a clear idea of what was going on. “Please make your command then, Duke.”

Chu Beijie lifted the tent flap to stare at the changing clouds behind a distant mountain. His thoughts seemed far away when his deep voice full of anticipation

said, “Pingting may have a plan of her own, but she’ll think that the real battle will be under the mountain. There won’t be many troops at the top though, so we can take this opportunity to shock her.”

He snapped back. “Pass on this command: everyone must cut branches to each make a fake person, and they must wear armour. Tonight, station them outside the tents and make it look like we’re asleep, unprepared for battle.”

Moran hurriedly went outside to pass on the order.

The soldiers outside the tent immediately began to bustle into life. Not long later, Moran came back and informed, “Duke’s task has been completed.”

Chu Beijie nodded and snapped on his own armour. With sword in hand, he broke out the command tent.

“Get on your horses, take the Cloud Valley route and capture the Bei Mo generals!”

The entire army shouted ‘Yes!’ in reply and left, leaving empty tents and nearly nine thousand fake soldiers behind.

Ten thousand soldiers stealthily approached Mount Dianqing, camouflaged against the varied trees in the forest. Their stealth so great that even their breaths made no sound. They soon stopped at the foot of the mountain opposite of Mount Dianqing, ready to go through the ominous Cloud Valley route, where Pingting was.

Back in the Bei Mo army, everything was as Chu Beijie had thought.

Pingting had stationed most of the army near the water source. The tents were close to the summit and having the height advantage allowed clear views of the surrounding territory.

All of the other generals were with the rest of the army. At the moment, only Pingting, Ze Yin, and Ruohan were left in the main command tent. The three sat in a circle, studying the most concise map of the forests they could find.

“Great plan!” Ze Yin patted his leg in praise. “My Lady really is the strongest opponent Chu Beijie could have. It’s Dong Lin’s first time entering these forests, so they can’t be too familiar with this area. Adding poison to their water before

they realize it, Ze Yin can then go and attack their quarters while they're still poisoned. Humph, I hope Chu Beijie's in the group of ten thousand so that he will understand that even the men of Bei Mo are strong."

An idolizing expression was on Ruohan's eyes as he said, "You understand Chu Beijie so well. My Lady will definitely become the most famous female army advisor in the four countries."

Pingting's expression didn't change or rather, it looked more like an angry-hurt expression.

She sighed. "Generals, don't be happy yet. The tactic Pingting just mentioned of may be successful against other people, but it won't work on Chu Beijie."

Ze Yin was having a pretty good laugh when she said this. He stopped. "Why's that?"

"Chu Beijie is the strongest general in the world at the moment, and his way of thinking covers everything. Don't forget that he did once send soldiers to capture poisonous wasps so wouldn't it be very unusual if he didn't send someone out to find out the topography of this area as well? Underestimating the enemy is a deadly blow to commanding officers. Pingting will cause a massive defeat if she concludes that Chu Beijie would be easily outdone with a poisoned water source."

Ruohan paled. "Chu Beijie's that strong? Then what should we do?"

Pingting's eyes flickered back to the map. She smiled sweetly. "Once Chu Beijie finds out we're on Mount Dianqing from his spies, it won't take long for him to uncover the fact that we've poisoned the water. To be honest, the reason why Pingting chose this mountain was really to give him this false impression."

After speaking so much and so energetically, Pingting broke off by inhaling a few deep breaths of air. Her cheeks were flushed. She rolled her black crystal-like eyes once before continuing. "Once Chu Beijie's thinks that he's got my plan, he would make fake people and then look for a path that we won't expect from and attack the supposedly, mostly empty commanding tents."

Ze Yin and Ruohan knew that what she was saying was right.

Ze Yin's beard bobbed up and down as he said, "We can station most of the

troops close to the tents, then thrash Chu Beijie's army."

Pingting however, shook her head at this, "That's not the best. Mount Dianqing isn't the best place for an ambush."

"There's something I'd like My Lady to clarify." Ruohan voiced the question in his thoughts. "My Lady said that Chu Beijie would look for a route that we won't expect from. Which path is Lady thinking of?"

"Commander Ruohan has got the idea." Pingting said and pointed at a route on the map.

Ze Yin and Ruohan both looked down and stared at it in shock.

Several moments later, Ruohan finally breathed out, "Chu Beijie actually dares to get ten thousand men to go through the notorious Cloud Valley Route. He's really daring, huh. But then again, if we hadn't been able to predict his actions, he would have definitely succeeded."

"He likes to use bizarre tactics. This time, he'll get a taste of his own medicine." Ze Yin almost sneered. "I'll immediately take some soldiers to round him from behind. I'm sure it will give him a nasty shock."

He saluted towards Pingting, "Please give me your command, Main Advisor."

Pingting smiled and held-up a command flag. Then, in a clear ringing voice like a black-naped creole, she commanded, "Listen, Main General Ze Yin, I, as main military advisor, command you to go down the mountain and block the enemy's escape route. Surround them from the back, they should still be on the opposite mountain, Mount Bilei, at the moment." After saying this, she felt a flood of unease so she lowered her voice. "Although we have more soldiers than Chu Beijie, surrounding them is more important at the moment. Do not attack without my command."

"That's a bit..."

Pingting handed it over nonetheless and explained, "Chu Beijie is Dong Lin's main advisor and commander, and at the same time is the brother of Dong Lin's King. Even if we capture him alive, the Dong Lin's army will be lost."

She took out another command flag and called, "Commander Ruohan."

“I’m here!”

“Please lead another few hundred soldiers and gather at the other end of the Cloud Valley route and damage its rope bridge, so that even the Dong Lin army can’t get any closer to Mount Dianqing.”

Ruohan took the flag and replied ‘Yes Ma’am!’ loudly.

Pingting continued to order, “As an experienced fighter, Commander Ruohan, you don’t have to come back here and report back once you’ve completed your task. You may march down the mountain to help Main General.”

Pingting sighed in relief after making all of the necessary preparations. Her vision had gone blurry again. She knew it was from overworking so she sat down and closed her eyes to rest.

Most of the people had gone with Ze Yin. Their excitement had been obvious. They were ready to ambush their enemy, the army that had stressed and pressured them for so long.

Once the thundering sound of galloping horses passed, her surroundings quieted down.

Pingting calmly sat inside the command tent and woke up listening to the sound of silence, the sound of no sounds dancing in the air.

Another plot.

Plots in plots. She frowned and couldn’t help stroke her sore eyebrows, a habit of hers.

She blinked.

The flashy command flags were really too bright to look at but after so much plotting, she had realised that they weren’t part of a game. Each word she said could send several hundred soldiers, who still had families waiting back at home, to their deaths.

As for Chu Beijie, who had retreated ten kilometres for her, he had been wrong once more.

He would never be able to guess that Pingting could be so cruel, merciless.

Her eyes were dry but she couldn't even shed half a tear. Somewhere in the immense, dense forest, lay a battlefield. Pingting slowly got up and went through the tent flap to outside.

She found the forest of Mount Dianqing.

Beijie, it's me, it's me again. For Yangfeng and for the several thousand people of Bei Mo who've lost their homes.

Pain and regret rippled through her body, attacking her from the inside. She wished that this was all a dream.

"Could this be a punishment of my previous past life?" Pingting bit her red lip, not wishing to say more.

The potential bloodshed of her complicated plotting, how was it fair to the person who'd once so tenderly placed daisies in her hair?

She missed him, missed him! Pingting clutched her chest in pain but remembered that she was also the main advisor and the promise she made to Yangfeng and her unborn child.

Parting Soul – her Master was right – her soul had left. Her homeless soul wanted to be picked up by the wind and carried into the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, where she could play "Heroes and Beautiful Women" once more.

It was really a pity that the wind nor the mountain wasn't the place she wanted to be at for it only messed up her hair and did nothing to move her lonely spirit.

"They say a hundred years pass like a dream, but this dream is really long." Surrounded by strong winds, Pingting muttered, "It's so damn painful."

Ze Yin was probably leading his army to where they were as the sky was slowly being dyed red.

Ruohan was probably still damaging the rope bridge.

Even if she feigned indifference – she knew it was too late.

Perhaps the two of them never had another chance to come back together.

Her thoughts almost made her laugh. Once the tactics were decided, there was

no further use for an advisor. She was free to think about any rubbish she felt like thinking. In approximately two hours, Ze Yin should have successfully captured Chu Beijie.

If Chu Beijie was captured, he'd utterly hate her, a hatred that seeped from his bones.

Then again, he was almost always composed and would probably escape. Her heart beat wildly, as if his escape was a better solution, but she knew that he'd still hate her nonetheless.

Her heart darkened at the thought.

If Chu Beijie died in battle...Pingting had been constantly avoiding the thought but now she couldn't help but to worry over it.

"You live, I'll live as well. If you die, I'll die with you." When she had said that, she was in Chu Beijie's arms, feeling like she could melt into water.

Pingting bit her lip into a sad smile. It was best if Chu Beijie died. Then she could easily give her own life to him and be together.

"Give me your life." She only came back to her senses when she said this, only to realise that she was sitting on a patch of grass near the tents. Wary eyes of the few soldiers, who had been left to protect their main advisor, watched.

The sky was still changing when a bomb exploded not far from her. The air was temporarily filled with ashes. Pingting stood up and silently cursed herself for daydreaming again.

"Kill!"

"Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

She wasn't directly in front of the command tent but could still hear the coming battle cry.

Pingting was horrified. She turned backwards, her eyes widening.

The Dong Lin army!

Impossible, how could this be?

"Kill! Capture the enemy advisor alive!"

“Duke has commanded for the capture of the enemy advisor alive!”

Chu Beijie’s command flag appeared on the outskirts surrounding the camp and countless Dong Lin soldiers rushed out from the trees.

The sky was bloody red.

“Protect the main advisor! Protect the main advisor!”

The few remaining soldiers rushed up to defend, but since most of the army was with Ze Yin, their efforts were in vain against the massive Dong Lin army.

Her soldiers, soaked in blood, retreated towards her with their swords in hand.

“We must give up on the campsite! My Lady, get on the horse!”

Give up?

Lost, she had lost to Chu Beijie. It was more than just obvious.

She still lost in the end.

Pingting widened her eyes and dazedly forced onto the horse by her soldiers. A gaunt, blood-stained face popped into her view.

“My Lady! We must give up on the campsite! Run! Run!”

The hoarse, wild screams of the dying soldiers entered her ears. Pingting finally came back to her senses.

“Whip! Run! Run!”

Her ears were ringing, red pools of blood reflected in her shiny black pupils.

After her soldiers had gotten her on the horse, they went back and took up their fight against the intruders.

“Ahh!” Someone screamed again.

Pingting turned away, her horrified eyes meet with another pair of eyes that almost stopped her heart.

Beijie, do you want to kill me?

The moment their eyes met, Pingting’s heart shattered. She never realised that a person’s heart could shatter into thousands of pieces so easily, so quietly.

Through her tears, Pingting stiffened as she caught sight of Chu Beijie leaping over the fence, surrounding the campsite.

Against her will, she turned her horse and whipped it.

Run, run into this huge forest. Away from this person so I'll never see him again.

This felt so familiar to her; it was like a replay of back then.

The same actions taken and the same actions felt.

“Pingting!” Chu Beijie’s deep voice came somewhere behind.

Pingting closed her eyes and whipped the horse again. The wind blew hard against her pale white cheeks.

Don't chase me; it's too late. There's nothing between us anyway. Bai Pingting has long lost her soul since she can't return to her old home in the Jing-An Ducal Residence nor your Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence.

Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other.

Her tears blurred her vision, but she could clearly remember his comforting smirk from that time.

Never, ever coming true.

Tears blurred her eyes and she remembered his gentle smile from that day.

Whip, whip again!

She couldn't care less about the cold wind slapping against her face. Escaping from his field of vision, from the world he breathed air from, was the only thing she wanted to be at this moment.

But she could still hear the gallops of another horse – Chu Beijie was still chasing.

Pingting felt crazed and all she cared was galloping forward, even aimlessly.

Two people on two horses as the sunset dyed the sky light-yellow, through the forest, towards Mount Dianqing's summit.

The once crazed horse gradually got tired. When Pingting brought down the

whip once more, the horse bellowed loudly and threw her off. She fell.

“Watch out!” Chu Beijie yelled.

Pingting slammed heavily into the ground, dazed for a brief moment. She gritted her teeth as she got up and finally realised why the horse had stopped. Not far, was an impossibly steep cliff.

She hadn’t realised that Ze Yin had left such a clever horse for her, but she knew that she had to do something soon. She could never return to Chu Beijie’s side with the status of an imprisoned enemy advisor.

Facing the steep cliff, Pingting calmed down. Standing close to the edge, she secretly looked back at Chu Beijie and smiled.

“This place is really pretty and Pingting is greatly inspired to sing. May Pingting sing a song for Chu Beijie?” She looked friendly enough, her eyes were bright as they followed Chu Beijie’s movements.

Chu Beijie realised that she was acting too calmly and knew that something was wrong. He knew that the things he wanted to say were not appropriate at such a critical moment and if he did, this wonderful woman who was even harder to catch than wisps of smoke wouldn’t hesitate to jump. His mind churned at the thought. He smiled back and softened his voice too.

“Gui Le’s five year treaty is an agreement between Pingting and me. If Pingting jumps, the treaty will no longer be valid and I will lead the Dong Lin army to attack Gui Le immediately. Please reconsider.”

The moment he said this, Pingting’s fake grin disappeared and she froze.

Chu Beijie took this moment to approach her and stopped in front.

The tears in Pingting’s eyes moved but did not fall.

In a quiet voice, she whispered, “Why did Duke come?”

“For you.” Chu Beijie replied. Once he had secured himself onto the horse he reached out a hand and eyed Pingting.

“Get on this horse with me. If you do, you will no longer be a Bai but a Chu.”

Pingting shook as if she had been struck by lightning.

She raised her head and cried, "Beijie!" Despite the feelings of anger, she felt those sweet, salty, spicy, and bitter emotions that she had guarded so carefully, her uncontrollable tears were only ones of happiness.

His strong love only belonged to Bai Pingting after all.

Chu Beijie was quiet for some time before he sighed. "With you calling me Beijie, what's the point of continuing to attack Bei Mo?" He laughed, delighted.

He looked back at Pingting and warmth filled his eyes. He reached out. "Pingting, come here."

Pingting studied the lines in his huge hand. Did she remember their warmth? They had once stroked across her hair, her cheeks, her tears, and smile...all from this very hand.

Her hand seemed to stabilize her world, as if her soul had returned and she was free to forget the King, Jing-An Ducal Residence, Gui Le, Bei Mo, and Yangfeng.

Can I really choose not to be a Bai?

She knew the answer as she looked at his hand.

Little by little she came towards him, through the countless mountains of their countries, through the fiery battles of their armies, and by forgetting her past.

From then on, Bai Pingting was no longer a Bai.

The danger in Bei Mo was solved and one day, Yangfeng would probably forget about Pingting and her child would probably never realise that his or her mother once had such a good friend.

Little by little she had gotten closer until finally she had touched those loving hands.

"Ah!" Pingting found herself being hoisted up from the waist the moment her hand tightened around his. In seconds her feet were in the air, but she was on the horse in his arms.

Chu Beijie's familiar smile entered her field of vision.

"Hey Pingting, the moon's out."

She raised her head. It was true, the moon had risen. It was bright and curved, like a silver bowl that had laughed so much until it was permanently ruined its back.

“Let’s swear to the moon to never betray each other.” He spoke each word earnestly.

She studied his solemn expression and replied, “I swear to the moon to never betray each other.”

Under the cold moonlight, the leader of the winning Dong Lin army crossed the Cloud Valley route, carried his one and only woman back to the campsite.

“Why frown?” Chu Beijie looked down at the treasure in his arms that he had spent so much time trying to get.

Pingting’s frown loosened as she replied, puzzled, “A weird feeling I can’t really describe; it feels a bit like frustration.”

“Why’s that?” Chu Beijie softly kissed the top of her hair. “Losing and winning is common in fighting; it’s not embarrassing to lose against your husband you know.”

The Cloud Valley route lay ahead.

“Can...I ask you something about the battle though?” She was still his enemy’s main advisor up until a few moments ago. Even now, she couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

Chu Beijie’s expression didn’t change as he replied, “Sure.”

“How is Duke going to punish Ze Yin? He’s Yangfeng’s husband and I...”

“I don’t plan to punish him at all. That’s why I chose the Cloud Valley route.” Chu Beijie chuckled, “I knew that you would poison the water source and then attack our quarters, so I decided to act first and attack your campsite. As for Ze Yin, let him muck around in my campsite of empty tents and fake soldiers.”

Pingting stopped breathing as she realised why she had lost.

Her guesses were completely right, but she had forgotten one thing — that his soldiers moved at an unusually fast pace.

His speed was indeed amazing, attacking several hours earlier than expected. She hadn't remembered this when she first saw him because back then she was torn between misery and happiness.

Such a simple reason had caused her to lose.

Having said that, does that mean Chu Beijie has no idea that Ze Yin was on the other side of the route. Chasing after his disappearing soldiers?

The horse reached the Cloud Valley route's rope bridge yet Pingting's brain could barely work as she's still in a trance-like state from meeting Chu Beijie. Keeping the Dong Lin army's speed, they would have long crossed the rope bridge and hidden themselves in the forest before Ruohan damaged it.

No, Ruohan didn't know that Chu Beijie had already crossed the bridge, meaning that he'd damage it according to the plan.

But...why did the rope bridge look perfectly fine?

During this puzzling moment, there was a nasty cracking sound and the bridge began to sway.

The truth dawned on Pingting like a strike of lightning. Ruohan had indeed followed the plan as he didn't know that Chu Beijie and his soldiers had already crossed. It was damaged all right and it was still waiting for the enemy to cross it.

Chu Beijie didn't fall in the trap as he came, but fell into the trap as he returned. It was just like a joke from the Gods.

*Crack...crack...*the snapping rope bridge gave off ear-splitting noises.

Pingting snapped out of her trance and yelled fiercely at Chu Beijie, "Go back! The bridge has been tam—" She hadn't finished before the rope bridge broke in half with a bang and Pingting's body lost all support and her words plummeted with her body.

"Ahh!"

She was still in the air when she felt her waist being grabbed by Chu Beijie.

The wind whipped against their faces as he held tight.

The two squeezed their eyes and plunged towards the darkness, the dangerous

valley that had yet to be recorded onto maps.

Translation Notes

- Heroes and Beautiful Women: The song Pingting always sings. I don't think it's ever been given a name, so this is it.
- Hundred years pass like a dream: Pretty much what you see. It's said that life passes so fast, like a dream (most dreams are happy). Pingting disagrees with this because she thinks time passes really slowly (she is upset after all). It's often used to describe ironic situations.
- Joke from the gods: It's said that gods like to play very nasty, mean jokes on humans.

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The sound of wind strongly whipped in their ears. Pingting's eyes were tightly squeezed shut and could feel Chu Beijie's strong arms tightly clutching onto her. Although Chu Beijie fell later, he had flipped Pingting in midair so that his back was facing towards the ground.

There were several cracking sounds as the two fell through the canopy of dense forest. Snapped branches fell messily alongside them.

In the midst of the dense forest of tall, centuries-old trees, the cracking sound continued, although the two's plunge seemed to have been softened by the branches a little. Pingting and Chu Beijie tightened their grips, refusing to let go, as they knew they were approaching the ground rapidly and survival was unlikely.

Even if they died, at least they were together.

Thump! Thump! Two muffled sounds came from within the quiet, ancient forest. There was no predicted sound of bones shattering as they hit the ground, only two strange sounds. It seemed that the ground was soft like cotton and had significantly reduced the momentum of the two's fall.

Pingting and Chu Beijie opened their eyes, not daring to think that they were still alive. The two looked around and suddenly yelled, "Ahh!", in both delight and shock. The surrounding trees grew an unknown type of berry. Due to its remoteness, its flowers bloomed of their own accord and no one picked its berries, leaving them to fall onto the ground. Year by year, the layer of wild berry and leaves has increased in size. At this time of the year, the wild berries had just ripened and fell once more, so the layer had been thick enough to save their fall.

The foliage that lay peacefully on the ground was like a landing cushion and had saved them as if fate decided so.

Pingting flashed Chu Beijie a sweet smile, they were in a place where no one had ventured before. The corners of Chu Beijie's mouth had not quite lifted, when they froze, revealing a strange expression instead.

Seeing his state, Pingting's face couldn't help harden as her eyes quietly studied Chu Beijie.

It was as if Chu Beijie had thought of his something and his expression darkened every passing second. Then, as if covered in a layer of frost, he spun out of the "fruit mix" and chose a less fruit-covered place to rest.

Pingting gaped as he walked away, staring dazedly ahead for a while. She saw that Chu Beijie had taken off his war bag and that fresh blood was trickling out of his right arm, towards the ground. Realisation shocked her as she approached him, head bowed in shame. "I'll help you," she whispered.

"Go away." Chu Beijie grunted, cold and ruthless. He heard Pingting stiffen and take a step back, eyes fixed on himself. Chu Beijie ignored her and took out some expensive ointment, that he always kept nearby in cases of emergency, out of his battle bag. He spread it over his wound, grinding his teeth in pain and wrapped it up in a bandage.

"Cloud Valley route..." Pingting knew that he was angry and softened her voice, "I was the one who ordered to stop you from reaching our command tent, sorry for forgetting to tell you."

Chu Beijie didn't seem to be listening. His head was bowed too, as he continued to wrap up his wound on his right arm.

"Back then, the two armies were clashing and as the main military advisor, I had to decide on a tactic. I...who knew that you'd return that way too..."

Chu Beijie jerked his head, his sharp eyes piercing Pingting. In a cold voice, he said, "Coming or returning, I would've gone on that route either way. So your original...original plan was to kill me. Nice, nice." He stared at her even harder. How could he not be angry, first feeling delighted then realising that he might've just been killed by the very same person, his sweetheart?

He was no longer grinding his teeth as he said this, only smiling coldly. "Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other..."

"Hah..." He repeated it twice, then tossed his head and laughed loudly, yet mournfully. "Geez geez, Chu Beijie, you're such an idiot!"

Pingting's heart froze at his words. Even back in the palanquin, facing the several thousand enemy troops alone, she hadn't felt cold. Her face was drained of colour beyond measure as she stammered, "I...I..." She had commanded Ruohan to break the Cloud Valley route, but hadn't expected him to still make it look untampered so that the enemy troops would plunge to their deaths without suspicion. However, if you stood from Ruohan's perspective, killing or injuring as much of the enemy troops was much needed in war, so it was understandable.

Pingting continued to say, "I...", for a long time. Looking at Chu Beijie, tears slid down her cheeks, yet she couldn't say a single word.

The moon hung high in the sky, the forest was a deathly quiet. Pingting's knees were shaky. Leaning on a tree for support, she slowly pulled herself to sit down, whispering, "You mustn't get a cold while you're injured. Is it okay if I light a fire?"

Chu Beijie sat cross-legged at another tree. He gazed far into the distance, expressionless. "When you light the fire, I wonder who'll find us first, mine or the Bei Mo army."

It was as if Pingting had been punched in the chest. It hurt so much that she could no longer talk. Her eyes blurred once more and she held them back with great difficulty. Her heart felt like it was melted, yet he thought she was more like the poison of a snake and scorpion than anything. She wiped her tears with her sleeve and stood up against the trunk, turning to leave.

"Where are you going?" Chu Beijie heard her moving, though he still refused to look at her and his voice was still cold.

Pingting's sighed, "Of course I'm going to find the Bei Mo army." Not waiting to see Chu Beijie's reaction, she walked away unhesitatingly.

Chu Beijie harrumphed once and only looked back after waiting for her to leave.

In the darkness, the light delicately bounced off a long hairpin in her silky hair. Yangfeng had given her the expensive, highly refined, jade hairpin.

Chu Beijie saw that she was only bending down in a nearby undergrowth, secretly relieved that she hadn't gone very far. There were a lot of wild beasts and poisonous plants in the forest, meaning that most normal people wouldn't be able to walk out safely. Having that thought in mind, his anger softened and his gaze refused to leave Pingting.

Not long later, Pingting walked back, her war bag filled with various things and spilled them out in front of Chu Beijie. There were some barely ripe fruits and a few roots of plants he didn't know the names of. Chu Beijie had long turned his gaze away and it was back to the original indifferent expression.

Pingting sat down, picking up a fruit. "There's enough wild berries in this forest to fill our stomachs, but as I've decided to kill you, it's better if you don't eat."

Chu Beijie didn't answer, so Pingting grabbed the roots that she'd just collected. "Of course these roots also have poison, it's better if you don't have them. It's better to be a one-armed general than being killed by an evil woman after all."

She pouted annoyedly, but Chu Beijie continued to show no interest, and she lost her enthusiasm quickly. She quietened, chewing a few berries, but quickly threw them away as they tasted bitter in her mouth. She sat back at the tree.

The forest wind was even wilder at midnight, chilling one's heart.

The two were utterly silent, their gazes not touching. Pingting looked down at her feet and Chu Beijie's face turned north. They were only a few feet apart, yet it felt like a thousand miles. No matter how hard they tried, they'd never get any closer and both were indescribably disheartened.

What had happened before the tampered route was like a dream. If it was a dream, they had woken way too fast.

Pingting's eyes blinked wearily yet they refused to close properly, although they wanted to just collapse. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the unmoving Chu Beijie. Blinking again, tears dripped out silently. At first she rubbed them away, but after a while she gave up. *Let them flow*, she thought, *it*

seems to lessen the pain a little.

Chu Beijie was listening to Pingting with his ears. His heart twitched at the sound of her crying, but he still refused to look back, silently cursing himself that despite being part of the Dong Lin Royal House, he lacked perseverance. A moment later, he heard a muffled cough. She seemed to have blocked her mouth, letting only a barely audible sound through. He slowly turned around, unable to last any longer. He grabbed his robe that had been blown dry by the wind and softly tossed it. It flew and fell accurately close to Pingting's eyes.

Pingting froze and stared at the robe as if it was like some rare thing she'd never seen before. A long while later, she put it over her shoulders. Her sad eyes moved towards Chu Beijie and she bit her lip as she stood up. She picked up the roots on the ground and crept towards Chu Beijie.

She uneasily touched Chu Beijie's badly bandaged right arm. This man had almost never been injured and was therefore very clumsy when bandaging.

Chu Beijie's body was rigid and his expression was dark. Surprisingly, he didn't make any sound or action. Pingting sighed in relief and sucking on her lip, she undid his shabby bandages. Looking for a rock, she ground the roots and spread the paste evenly over his wounds.

Her right arm felt cool, an indescribably comfortableness. Pingting's nimble fingers tenderly touched Chu Beijie's developed muscles.

She continued to do so and then re-bandaged his wound. Pingting examined it with a somewhat tired expression, nodding in satisfaction. She stood up to go back to the tree.

Feeling her knees tighten, she realised that Chu Beijie was holding onto her ankle.

Pingting carefully turned around to look at him.

Chu Beijie didn't say a word, only pulling Pingting down to sit down with his left arm. His right arm was raised and lightly brushed across Pingting's face.

Pingting's trembling eyes looked at Chu Beijie's, which were barely visible in the moonlight. Lovingly obeying him, she leaned into his arms.

Baddump, baddump...Chu Beijie's thumping heart was in her ears.

Maybe it was her own heartbeat.

"Am I wrong?" Chu Beijie sighed, "Pingting, tell me."

"Should Pingting be pleased?" Pingting replied softly, "Whoever in this world could make Chu Beijie misunderstand?"

Chu Beijie felt helpless, a feeling he had never experience since birth. "How am I supposed to deal with you? What else are you lying to me about?"

"Will you believe me if I tell you?"

"Tell me, ever since becoming the advisor of the Bei Mo army, why have you been using delaying tactics? Are you waiting for something?"

Pingting's star-like pupils gazed at Chu Beijie as she replied honestly, "I'm waiting for the news from the King of Dong Lin." Feeling Chu Beijie stiffen, Pingting softly laughed, leaning comfortably in his arms. "Give Pingting one last chance. Let Pingting prove herself to you with the truth, Pingting would never do anything to hurt you."

Chu Beijie whispered, "What's going to happen to the Royal House?"

"No matter how bad the news is going to be, it's just a misunderstanding." Pingting's beautiful eyes shone softly in the dim light. In a sweet, dreamy voice she said, "When you get to Dong Lin, you'd know that Pingting doesn't dare hurt you and would never hurt the people around you. Beijie, go back to Dong Lin and see my real intention."

In the moonlight it was a beautiful scene, even the harsh forest wind, seemed to have softened too. The bitterly cold feeling had left, leaving an inviting warmth behind.

Nothing else to be said, nothing else to change.

Just like that, quiet in both mind and surroundings, hearts listened to hearts.

The two snuggled together, watching the moon fade as the sun rose in the east, listening to the cheerful chirping of birds.

Pingting seemed to wake up from an illusion that was beautiful beyond words

as she lazily stretched.

“I wonder what’s going on outside.”

“The two armies have both lost their advisors. The Dong Lin army’s thoughts will be a mess but as your Bei Mo army is waiting, they won’t attack either.” Chu Beijie calmly analysed, “Both sides are the same, one side doesn’t know what’s happening with the enemy, while the other is still at the foot of the mountain, searching for us.”

They exchanged looks, thoughts back onto war.

Human voices were heard and Chu Beijie abruptly got up, backing away rapidly. He hid amongst a clump of trees, calling, “It’s the Bei Mo army.”

Pingting’s expression changed. “If they find you, even I can’t protect you.” She put down the war bag and handed it back to Chu Beijie, urgently whispering, “I’m going to go out and they’ll find me, so they won’t have to do such a large-scale search party anymore. Stay hidden until you see the Dong Lin army’s search party.

Chu Beijie grabbed her and kissed her fiercely. Lowering his voice, “When you get back, find a way to get rid of them. I’ll wait for you in Dong Lin.”

Pingting blushed, desperately studying him as she parted.

Bei Mo’s search party were extremely delighted at the finding of their main advisor.

Pingting told them of her adventures since falling down and everyone said it was fate that she’d survived. No one cared about Chu Beijie, not to mention the Dong Lin army search party that would cause immediate bloodshed if the two were to meet.

Anyway, finding the main advisor was a great achievement already. She was immediately escorted back to the main camp.

At the main camp, Ze Yin personally led the other commanders to welcome her back. The other women serving the military were asked to help her with a bath. After putting on clean clothes and some fragrance, she was led to the main command tent, where Ze Yin and the others were waiting impatiently for her.

“Congrats My Lady for the complete victory! Chu Beijie’s invincible streak has finally come to an end.” Ze Yin laughed for a while, adding, “Pity Chu Beijie’s actions were too quick, while we were still doing preparations, he had already crossed the route. Otherwise, we would’ve completely defeated the Dong Lin army.”

Ruohan’s voice was still disturbed, “If it hadn’t been for My Lady’s advice, we would never been able to turn the tides so that the enemy would give up, or we would be long dead because of Chu Beijie.”

“What’s even more surprising, is My Lady’s courage to die in order to trap the enemy. That’s something that even us, men, can’t do.” A strong voice interrupted, said Sen Rong, the commander of the right wing.

Pingting felt ashamed as the Bei Mo commanders had misunderstood. This misunderstanding was difficult to explain so she gave up. Blushing, she whispered, “My Generals are overestimating me, if I hadn’t everyone’s support, how is Pingting, a weak girl, able to do anything? Unfortunately there are lots of berries in the forest below the valley, so Dong Lin has probably not lost their invincible general.” Hoping that the Dong Lin army had already found Chu Beijie, she remembered his last words, “I’ll wait for you in Dong Lin.” Her heart was no longer lonely, as if flowers had blossomed instead.

Ze Yin saw Pingting blush, but thought that she was feeling guilty for not being able to die with the enemy commander, quickly adding, “My Lady has already completed the task. Today morning, we received the news that the Dong Lin Royal Residence is a mess.” He secretly thought *she’s a woman who fell through dense forest and it was only luck that she managed to turn around, falling in a safe place. Such loyalty is incredibly rare in this world. Yangfeng was right about her personality, and her adamance to follow her every word, no matter how ridiculous they sound.*

Remembering his wife back at home, his heart sweetened and he smiled.

“The Dong Lin Royal Residence is in a mess so the Dong Lin army will get the news too. In other words, Bei Mo’s danger will be solved as Chu Beijie will leave when he hears the news.” Pingting replied assuringly.

“Is My Lady sure?” Sen Rong was still a little doubtful. A few days ago, he was

still trying to fiercely defend Bei Mo with his last drop of bitter determination and now suddenly the Dong Lin army was just going to retreat?

Pingting gave him a certain expression, nodding with a soft expression. “General Sen, that is something Pingting, as the main military advisor, is most sure about.”

“A withdrawal!” A voice yelled outside the tent. The flap was thrown upwards as a spy exclaimed loudly, “It’s a withdrawal! Announcing to all the generals that the Dong Lin army has withdrawn! The Dong Lin army has withdrawn!” The sound rumbled at his excited announcement.

Ze Yin couldn’t help being startled and took two steps forward, grabbing the spy by the shoulder saying, “Have you spied properly? Dong Lin has really withdrawn? It’s not another trick?”

“It’s true!” The spy looked up, teary eyed, in a voice that seemed about to cry in joy. “When our brothers’ heard this, they couldn’t believe it so they went and checked themselves before reporting to all of you, Generals. The Dong Lin army are retreating away orderly, along with their luggage. Even their general, Moran looks pressurised. They’re really retreating!”

Although Pingting had long planned this, but when it really happened, it was still something incomprehensible. The once at stake Bei Mo was saved? The wolf-like, tiger-like, Dong Lin army were obediently retreated, without even doing one last nasty surprise attack? The blood-stained sky, the desperate eyes on the bloody battlefield, was no longer in sight?

Stunned silence in the tent, as if they couldn’t believe the brilliant news. After a while of silence, there was a loud cheer as Sen Rong jumped up from his chair, tugging the cloak on his shoulder. He fell on one knee in front of Pingting with a thump, his hands clutching onto his blood-stained and dirt-ridden cloak. Gazing upward, he said, “This cloak has been with Sen Rong through extensive travels, please accept it My Lady.”

Pingting could never accept it and stood up, waving her hand, “How could I accept such an important thing?”

“My Lady...Does My Lady look down on me? I, Sen Rong, owe my homeland and my family to My Lady, who saved them all.” This man’s face was unkempt

and although his voice was as loud as a tiger, he was choking with emotion right now.

Pingting was a little startled and grit her teeth. “Fine, I’ll accept it.” As soon as she received the cloak in Sen Rong’s hands, she heard another thumping sound within the tent. All of the generals had fallen onto their knees, following Sen Rong’s actions.

Ruohan didn’t wait for Pingting to open her mouth and said, “In all of Bei Mo, only us who have fought with My Lady in this battle of Kanbu know that it was thanks to My Lady that the tables were turned in this battle that would have caused Bei Mo to be conquered. Only we know the heart stopping hardships that you have tolerated for us. This cloak has all of our deceased brother’s blood and all of our appreciation and admiration for My Lady. If My Lady doesn’t want to accept it, please burn it.”

Pingting was at a loss for words and her crystal-like eyes slowly rolled once. She turned to the crowd with a solemn expression and moved quietly towards them, taking the cloaks off their hands softly. Including Ze Yin’s, there were twelve cloaks in total. She laid them on the table, studying the cloth soaked in blood of their allies and enemies. She sighed, “War is really too scary, I hope I’ll never participate in it again.”

“Dong Lin army has retreated, therefore the war has ended.” Ze Yin stood up, the colour returning back into his cheeks as he shook Pingting’s hand, “The King has commanded for My Lady to return the command flag and go back to the capital, Bei Yali, to receive your reward.” His expression was not without guilt.

Pingting nodded, “That’s the way it should be.” She took out the command flag and handed it to Ze Yin. She was once more free and at once relaxed quite a bit. Chuckling, she said, “From the capital city of Dong Lin to Kanbu, even on the fastest horses, the news would take at least five days, meaning that the Dong Lin King has probably been in a coma for five or six days.” Seeing Ze Yin’s stunned expression, she asked curiously, “What’s wrong?”

Sen Rong shook his head, bellowing, “My Lady doesn’t actually know the latest news? The Dong Lin Royal Residence is chaotic not because the Dong Lin King is in a coma, but because two of the princes, who are not yet ten years old, have

been poisoned to death. Now the Royal House is all fighting over the position of the crown prince.”

Pingting’s eyes widened, as if her head had been cracked open by lightning, and her world felt shaken.

Her ears buzzed and she dimly saw that the commander was opening and closing his mouth, but couldn’t hear a word.

“What did you say...” She weakly croaked out the words, her throat parched. Pingting cried, coughing out fresh blood in shock. A blinding white light flashed in her mind and an overwhelming darkness surrounded her as she fell.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 22

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch22

It was hot, causing sweat to drip continuously from faces.

“Give Pingting one last chance. Let Pingting prove herself to you with the truth, Pingting would never do anything to hurt you.”

She was still in those arms, smiling upwards.

“Pingting doesn’t dare hurt you, and would never hurt the people around you.”

“I’ll wait for you in Dong Lin.”

Let’s swear to the moon...

Never turn against each other...

“Geez geez, Chu Beijie, you’re such an idiot!” And the shrill laughter that followed spread pain through her ears.

It felt as if someone had ripped open her skull, tearing at the nerve cells with nails, even biting with sharp teeth.

A dream, it had to be a dream.

Hot too, as hot as lava.

This was a dream, but she couldn’t wake up. Pingting was within the dream, slowly munching on wild berries. It seemed that the berries were ripe with a nice red colour on them, but each one was bitterer than the last. It was miserable.

Why so bitter?

Why are they this bitter?

This is a dream, an unwakeable dream.

The flashy carriage was trotting towards home. There was no command flag on top and the curious Bei Mo onlookers did not know that the person who'd saved their country was inside — a woman, a woman who didn't even belong to Bei Mo.

She was once part of Gui Le, possibly Dong Lin but now, she probably no longer belonged to herself.

"I'll wait for you in Dong Lin."

Wait for you...

Their mumbled conversation and eyes filled with love, was as soft as that night's moonlight.

But it was just a dream, an unwakeable dream.

But she had to wake up, to see who had ruined her. Ruined Bai Pingting so easily. Ruined everything she'd so painstakingly waited for.

She gritted her teeth and struggled with all her hate to push open, her heavy, heavy eyelids, little by little.

Light leaked into her eyes, stabbing sorely at them. She opened her eyes wide, not wanting to succumb to the glare. She mustered all of her strength to stare hard at the person in front, as if she'd continue to stare at her until her eyes were cracked.

Main General's wife, Yangfeng.

She was already back by Yangfeng's side, lying on the bed that she had once spent the whole night chattering to her. The silk pillow was still soft, still just as gorgeous as before.

Yangfeng, who had been waiting by her side for several days, was absolutely delighted to see Pingting open her eyes but when she looked at Pingting's expression, she suddenly felt scared and shivered. "Pingting, you're finally up." Those words were usually easy to say, but these felt caught in her throat after seeing Pingting's expression.

"Who did you give the anaesthetic too?" Pingting's voice was hoarse.

“The King...”

“Did the King see anyone else after getting it?”

Yangfeng bit her lip, suddenly asking, “Why did you just say it was an anaesthetic? Although it can’t kill adults with a strong build, it’s enough to kill a child. It doesn’t even need to be much, just a little would do.”

Pingting’s heart felt so twisted and her bone-thin fingers desperately clutched her heart. She closed her eyes for a few moments, then opened them again, mustering some strength into her voice. “So you gave the anaesthetic to poison two of Dong Lin’s princes to death? Yangfeng, are you that cruel? Didn’t you think about doing more good deeds so your unborn child would have a more blessed life?”

This seemed to stab at Yangfeng, who stroked her convex belly while taking two steps back. She slumped to her knees, tears brimming. In a quiet voice, she said, “I took the anaesthetic to the Royal Residence, but the King only called for me several moments later. He asked me if I knew that it could poison young children. The King said that the King of Dong Lin being in a coma wouldn’t actually cause Dong Lin to be in a mess, but if their two young princes were dead, then they’d be in a mess for several years. Pingting, I was imprisoned in the Royal Residence and couldn’t pass any messages. Really, I couldn’t pass on anything! Ze Yin...Ze Yin wasn’t at Bei Yali either...” She had been living in fear for many days of her life and at that moment, she couldn’t hold back anymore. She started to cry.

“Yangfeng,” Pingting propped her upper body up with much difficulty, her black hair hanging to one side of her gaunt face. Barely managing to get out of the bed, she shuffled towards Yangfeng, pressing down on her shoulders. She stared into her eyes, asking, “Yangfeng, who told the King of Bei Mo about the other properties of the anaesthetic? Tell me, you know right?”

“I...” Yangfeng raised her eyes to meet Pingting’s, her face full of tear stains. She shook her head vigorously, “Don’t ask, Pingting...don’t ask.”

Pingting continued to stare at Yangfeng for a little longer, her eyes momentarily brightening with understanding. She turned back, her piercing gaze no longer, only sadness and disbelief in her eyes. She held her breath,

hesitatingly spitting out two words, “He Xia?”

Yangfeng couldn’t help but looked away.

Pingting helpless numb fingers loosened the grip on Yangfeng’s shoulders and leaned back on her knees. Her bloodless lips quivered for what seemed a long time, until they broke into a bleak smile. “Yeah, apart from him, who else knows about the other properties? We were the ones who compiled the prescription together to begin with.”

She remained dazed for a little longer, then as if remembering something, she started to struggle up. Yangfeng came forward to help her, but she gently waved her hand away, using a chair to help herself up instead. “Get a horse.”

Yangfeng saw that she was even unable to stand stably and made a strange expression, asking carefully, “Where are you going?”

“See He Xia.” Pingting’s white back teeth were grinding gently and her gaze was aimlessly in the distance. Her voice was hollow as she said, “I want to ask him personally...why did he do this to me?”

Yangfeng was silent for a while, finally sighing sadly. “You don’t need to go look for him. He’s in this General’s Residence right now. Ever since you came back, he’s been waiting for you to wake up.”

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 23

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch23

He Xia came in from the arched entrance of the outside garden. He'd seen the sitting Pingting from a distance away, through an open window amongst the fresh flowers.

She was thin, so pathetically thin. Her face was so haggard, no longer like the always laughing maid in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, so gaunt that it was heartbreaking to see.

He Xia pushed the bead curtain away, quietly stepping into the room. In the last few days, he had been waiting for Pingting to wake up, by her side, until he felt shy when the physician said she'd wake up soon, two days ago.

He wasn't sure that he'd be able to bear Pingting's expression when she woke up. After some hesitation, he decided to leave the room when she was most likely to wake up.

Although it was something he didn't want to do, there was no escape.

"Pingting..." He Xia called in a soft voice, approaching cautiously.

His smart and intelligent maid was before him but she was like a jade carving, no soul just body. Where was the delicate gem with the warm fragrance of a beauty? Where was the warmth in this corpse of the one who'd once leaned on him intimately, rode the horse with him, and admired stunning views with him? He Xia couldn't help reaching out, wanting to touch her.

"Don't touch me." Her voice chilled his heart and the words seemed to be spat out through her teeth.

His fingertips stopped at the last moment, hovering in midair, as if they couldn't go any closer. Pingting looked at him in the eyes, but it was like she didn't see anything at the same time.

That gentle, sly, smart, curious girl was gone. He Xia could only see her freezing coldness, as well as a little puzzlement and distress.

He Xia lowered his hands. "Pingting, you've changed," he said, his eyes downcast.

"Pingting is no longer the Pingting from the past." Pingting smiled a little sadly, asking faintly, "Is Master the same Master from the past?"

He Xia faced her, studying Pingting carefully. The past was gone, swept away from the ends of the Earth in a moment's time.

He sighed, full of mixed feelings. In a gentle voice he said, "Do you remember when we were children? I'd calligraph, while you'd grind ink. I'd sword dance, while you played qin. You'd follow me wherever I went, refusing to leave. When we grew up, whenever I went on an expedition, you always followed. At least half of my fame as being the Marquess of Jing-An is all thanks to you and your planning. If we could go back to the past, that'd be awesome."

"The past?" Pingting seemed to have lost in thought for a moment, but then her eyes frosted once more. "That's right, when we made that drug, you were the one who told me that it could poison young children, but it isn't fair to them, so it should only be used as an anaesthetic, not to kill." Her voice was faint.

He Xia shuddered, so angry that even his voice started to quiver, replying coolly, "The Jing-An Ducal Residence still existed then and my parents hadn't been killed by spies yet."

Blood-red lightning seemed to tear her sky apart.

Pingting lost her voice, stood up abruptly, but fell back onto the bed as her knees buckled.

"The House of Jing-An has done so much for Gui Le and had already decided to give up everything to lead a peaceful life in the mountains. Who knew that He Su's spies were ordered to kill us at all costs. It's my fault in a way for splitting the group in two, and leaving my parents to the other group. He Su, if I, He Xia,

isn't going to avenge for them, then I'm not human!" He gritted his teeth, his black pupils turned back to Pingting. In a soft voice, he said, "My parents are now gone and as I don't have any siblings, you're the only dearest person left to me."

Pingting was startled.

The Duke of Jing-An was gone...

The Duchess was gone...

The benefactors who'd helped her for the last eighteen years were gone. Without them, wouldn't she have become a little pile of bones outside the city, due to hunger and cold, long ago?

Could she really not be angry about what had happened to the House of Jing-An?

If so, then she should be able to forgive the new Gui Le King, He Su, who ungratefully plotted to burn his officials to death, causing her to end up in Dong Lin, meet Gui Le's worst enemy, Chu Beijie, who wrenched her heart to no end.

Her thoughts drifted a thousand miles and settled on the now scorched earth of the original Jing-An Ducal Residence. There, the loving Duchess first held her chubby hand while taking her to He Xia, who was looking down at his calligraphy. She laughed, "Look, what a likeable baby girl. Being left near the entrance probably means that you're fated to be with the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Xia'er, do you know what fate is?"

He Xia put down his pen, only laughing when he saw Pingting. "Don't move, just stand here. I'll draw for you, it's going to be pretty."

One stroke later, she became He Xia's personal maid, study buddy, playmate, military advisor and for a while, she almost became one of his concubines.

"Duke, Master taught me how to hold a pen."

"Duchess said that I'm better at qin than Master."

"If you don't properly study the Art of War like I said, I'm going to tell Duchess."

The gentle sounds of laughter went, completely disappearing.

She reached out, but the fragments of the past dissolved through her fingertips. They couldn't stay.

There was no turning back. If she wasn't He Xia's maid, then how could there have been such a plan, causing Chu Beijie to be completely ambushed, forcing him to have a five year peace treaty with Gui Le?

If Chu Beijie hadn't sworn peace on behalf of the Dong Lin Royal House, then He Su would never be able to send troops to persecute them without worry, and perhaps, even the Duke of Jing-An would have never been ambushed by the King's troops?

The events interlocked, causes and effects.

Thinking that much, Pingting's chest felt hollow. She even lost her strength to be angry and in a depressed voice, she said, "It's understandable that Master hates He Su, but why plot with the King of Bei Mo to kill two of Dong Lin's princes? Say, if Dong Lin were able to resolve matters quickly, then Bei Mo will have to deal with the calamity afterwards."

He Xia looked at Pingting pityingly, sighing, "No matter what Bei Mo's future is, I'd do anything to keep you by my side, Pingting."

Pingting stiffened, slowly gazing back at He Xia, smiling. "Master isn't suspecting that my loyalties are leaning towards Chu Beijie right? Otherwise Pingting wouldn't have left at her own accord back then, after forcing Chu Beijie into a treaty, to assure the group's location was safe."

"It isn't the same as back then, can Pingting still go back to Chu Beijie side?" He Xia looked away, asking in a deep voice. "Can Chu Beijie still believe in Pingting's words?"

Pingting wasn't shaking as much as He Xia had predicted. She only asked, "The Duke and Duchess are now gone, what is Master planning to do now?"

"Take you away. We'll live deep in the mountains and I'll be nicer to you than ever before."

Pingting's crystal-black eyes stared at He Xia. For some reason, her energy came back to her and she slowly got up, eyeing He Xia as she walked closer, as if trying to commit every inch of him to memory. She looked into He Xia's

bottomless pupils, her face not far from his. Pingting stressed every symbol, “Can Pingting still believe in Master’s words?” Her mouth lifted slightly to a dark smile as she turned around, lowering her voice, “Ever since the day I left, Pingting no longer had any connections to the House of Jing-An. Mr He, please leave.”

The room was eerily quiet.

After a few barely-restrained, but still heavy-sounding breaths, she heard some heavy footsteps behind her.

The bead curtain shook. He Xia was gone.

Pingting had lost all of her energy, collapsing on the chair.

Apart from the wife of the Main General’s and his child who were strangely worried, the rest of the servants in the residence were very happy.

The frontier was no longer at war and Dong Lin’s army was gone. The Main General was amazing after all, worthy of being the tree-like protector of Bei Mo.

General Ze Yin’s Residence, its people were all delighted as the Bei Mo King had sent a series of large gifts. Everyone knew that this was just a mere trifle. The King was waiting for Ze Yin to finish with the matters at the frontier and return to Bei Yali, to give him the real reward.

Yangfeng look bored at the gifts of gold, silver and lavish jewels in the small living room. She had had been worried about Pingting, who had been in bed for so long, but surprisingly she had become increasingly strong over the last few days. She drank all her medicine and ate food on time, nor was she crying. Yangfeng was much relieved that Pingting seemed to be steadily getting better.

More good news came in. A messenger from Kanbu reported the Ze Yin would return to Bei Yali soon.

Yangfeng clutched onto Ze Yin’s letter, her heart thumping madly. She wondered what Ze Yin’s reaction would be when she saw her belly, how happy he’d be. At least half of her worries instantly dissolved and she took off to the kitchen, making a few of her best dishes. She took them to Pingting’s room.

“Why are you up?” Yangfeng put down the steaming dishes on the table and

rushed to help her up. "I told you not to worry, you have to recover from your illness little by little. Ze Yin will be back in two days. I wrote to him, begging to get him to buy some good ginseng and bear bile on the way back."

Pingting shook her head. "I've rested plenty for the last few days, it's time for me to go."

Yangfeng was stunned, "Pingting, right now, you're..." She sighed, lowering her voice. "How can I not worry?"

"There's too much attention here, I can't stay too long." Pingting held Yangfeng's hand in hers, also lowering her voice. "We're sisters, you know everything on how I ended up here. I'm going to leave you some words, don't forget them."

Yangfeng's heart sank as she nodded, "Tell me."

"The political situation is changing and the four countries will be in a mess than ever before. The Main General has just achieved something amazing, so it's a good time to retire. And," Pingting hesitated, before sighing, "Be careful around the Marquess of Jing-An."

"The Marquess of Jing-An?"

"He's not the He Xia we knew."

The two both thought of the deceased young princes of Dong Lin at the same time and were silent.

Yangfeng looked at the cooling dishes out of the corner of her eye, only feeling a heavy feeling in her heart. Revealing sad expression, she said, "Are you really leaving?"

"Yes."

"The world is vast, where do you plan to go?" Yangfeng clenched her hand around Pingting's, then brought the other to tighten her grip. In a choked voice, she said, "How can I sleep at night, when I think of you, a wandering girl? There are people who want to capture you in Gui Le and Chu Beijie undoubtedly thinks that you killed his nephews."

"I'm going home?"

“Going home?”

Pingting smiled faintly, gentleness and anticipation flashing in her voice. Slowly, she replied, “There’s someone waiting for me.” Lifting her hand, the wind swept her hair back messily, as she stood up looking out of the window in the direction of Dong Lin.

Just as they had promised each other.

Translation Notes

- Bear Bile: Nowadays, raw bile can be sold for as much as \$24,000 (USD) per kg, approximately half the price of gold – according to Wikipedia. Basically, it’s another one of those cruel industries. Anyway, it’s often used in Traditional Chinese Medicine.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 24

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch24

All of Dong Lin had switched to plain colours. Under the King's Order, everyone, no matter nobility or ordinary peasants were forbidden to wear bright colours for the next three months. Clothing, curtains were plain and even bright signs that promoted wealth and fortune were ordered to be taken down.

The air was heavy with the hint of death.

Two of the princes, two of the King's own sons, had been poisoned without cure. They were so young, not yet ten years old. They were not eligible to be buried in Dong Lin's solemn, royal cemetery but had to be cremated according to Dong Lin's traditions. Their ashes were to be thrown into the river, so that they could disappear into the earth.

Chu Beijie had received the bad news and had hurriedly taken the troops back home. Around fifty miles away from the capital, the waiting figure of the Senior Official of the Left Wing, Sangtan, stopped them.

"Stop!" Seeing the brown royal flag flapping weakly in the distance, Chu Beijie held up his hand.

The exhausted troops of a hundred thousand came to a crashing halt, their dust-ridden faces confused to see the worried faces of the imperial guards outside the Royal Residence.

"The King's Order," Sangtan was holding onto the yellow-cloth Order, saying, "The capital is currently mourning over the death of two princes. Hostile presences such as soldiers are difficult to explain therefore they must not enter

the city. All of the soldiers and horses must stay behind and will be looked after by the Duke of Fu-Lang.”

The group of commanders dismounted, silent and listening. Only Sangtan’s emotionless, well-articulated words could be heard in one’s ears.

Sunset was approaching, skewing the shadows even more. A shiver ran up Moran’s spine as he heard the Order and he secretly looked at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie’s face wasn’t cold or warm. He took the King’s Order with two hands and stood up.

Sangtan’s expression was reserved, his hands hidden in his sleeves. In a kinder tone, he said, “The Duke is finally back. The Duke is the King’s own brother, so please try to comfort him so that King won’t ruin his health while mourning. The King told me to escort Duke personally into the city.” He took a step back, showing that there were around fifty royal guards behind him. It seemed that after the prince was poisoned, all of the Royal Residence’s servants had been changed. There was no one he recognised.

“Duke...” Moran was standing beside Chu Beijie and his voice was a little strangled. “The soldiers have left home for a while now and they were looking forward to coming home. Now that they’re forbidden to enter, I’m afraid that some people might cause riot. I might just be over-worrying, but it’s not good if a fight happens. What we should do, please, if Duke can tell us.”

Sangtan’s expression didn’t change, just coughed once, saying to Moran, “Did commander not listen as I read the King’s Order? They will be looked after by the Duke of Fu-Lang.”

“Senior Official, it might just be Moran worrying too much, but army matters are difficult to predict. There are a lot of soldiers here, if something happens...”

“Shut up!” The wordless Chu Beijie suddenly interrupted with a low cough.

Moran stopped talking and lowered his head.

Sangtan was worrying about how to deal with Moran and seeing Chu Beijie suddenly speak, he quickly added, “It’s rather late now. The King’s still waiting, so please may Duke get on the horse to come with me into the city.” He ordered someone to lead Chu Beijie’s horse.

Chu Beijie had been controlling Dong Lin's military power for a long time and he didn't like flattery, so he'd always rebuke in their faces. This caused other nobles to both fear and hate him. He wasn't usually afraid of them, but this event was massive, as two princes had been murdered while he was fighting away at the frontier. If the army wasn't away, the enemy would never have been able to take this opportunity to murder. It was hard for the King to not suspect him. Moran was familiar with such ways of thinking and knew that he mustn't let the Duke go in by himself, so he said, "Moran and a few personal attendants will accompany the Duke into the city."

But he hadn't expected that this was exactly what Santang wanted, who chuckled. "Duke's other personal attendants don't need to accompany and enter the city alongside. The King also said that victory was almost certain with Bei Mo and will later handsomely reward all soldiers here. I heard that Commander Moran has also made great merits in this war. The King said to allow Commander Moran to enter along with the Duke of Zhen-Bei. The King will personally reward you."

Sangtan's smile was gracious, but the crowd's hearts sunk. His words revealed too little and it was hard not to take them to heart. Their hands moved towards their scabbards, while they turned to look at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie seemed to have much difficulty to maintain his straight posture. The thin smile on his lips seemed sharp enough to slice his silhouette from the sunset. He was expressionless. Looking at the grand, distant capital, Chu Beijie's voice was light. "Sangtan, I have a question."

Sangtan's ice-cold voice was shocked. He was facing the deadliest man of the four countries after all, the strongest general of Dong Lin, who'd just returned from war and who had the command of ten thousands of men. If he said a word wrong, the Duke of Zhen-Bei could effortlessly crush him, a senior official, like an ant. He didn't dare make contact with Chu Beijie's sharp gaze. He lowered his head, "Please ask ahead Duke, Sangtan will most definitely answer if he can."

"Do you believe that I have anything to do with the princes' deaths?"

A tricky question to answer.

If Chu Beijie were to ask, "Does the King think that I have anything to do with

the princes' deaths?", then Sangtan could act like a dutiful official, saying that he couldn't dare guess what the King was thinking and say that he was just an official acting on the King's Order.

But Chu Beijie's words were carefully chosen, asking exactly as Sangtan feared. Saying that he didn't know was a blatant lie. In other words, there were only two possible options if Sangtan didn't want to offend Chu Beijie. The truth or lie.

Of course Sangtan couldn't afford to offend Chu Beijie here, so the truth was definitely out of the question. That was as equal as giving up his neck for Chu Beijie's sword to slice through. However, if he were to say "Sangtan absolutely does not believe that Duke has anything to do with the princes' deaths," in front of all the soldiers, if they spread gossip that reached the King's ears, he might be punished for conspiracy if the Duke really was guilty. Even his family would be in trouble.

In that moment, all sorts of wishes flooded into his mind and although Sangtan was famous in Dong Lin for his constant calm demeanour, he was sweating profusely. His expression was pale as he stuttered out, "Duke...that's...that's..."

"Is this question that hard to answer?" Chu Beijie laugh but it didn't seem like one. "Senior Official of the Left, you only need to answer. Do you think I have anything to do with it, or not?"

Chu Beijie's piercing gaze swept across Sangtan, who took a step back. "I dare not...don't dare..."

"Haha..." Not waiting for Sangtan's reply, Chu Beijie raised his head and laughed, his face in an indescribable pain. After a while he stopped laughing, his expression serious once more. In a low voice, "Has the House of Zhen-Bei been fired now?"

Sangtan's expression was stunned. "No way! Who...who said such a thing?" His hands in his sleeves were shaking very badly.

Perhaps under this world, there was only one person, a woman, who could speak to the Duke of Zhen-Bei without paling.

Chu Beijie turned towards him, calmly eyeing him, then continued to look at the city. His expression seemed to have crossed the fifty miles and was already

back in his familiar residence. Sometime later, he opened his mouth and sighed. “The little building is the most eastern part of the Residence. Outside there are flowers blooming while inside, there’s a guqin.” He continued to sigh for a little longer before coldly commanding, “Arrest him.”

Sangtan felt numb with cold and hearing Chu Beijie’s command, he forced himself to act. Moran had already pounced on him agilely as he started to raise the King’s Order in his hand. He was just a scholar official and was no opponent for a seasoned commander. He was captured easily.

Sangtan was on the floor, trembling, both in shocked and afraid. “I’m just passing on the King’s Order, yet you’re rebelling like this.” Some of Chu Beijie’s personal guards forced him to stand, then tied him up.

Seeing Sangtan captured, his companions, a few dozen imperial guards also tried to escape. The soldiers, however, had a much faster reaction and surrounded them properly, swords out of their scabbards.

In just a moment’s time, the welcoming party for Chu Beijie was tied up like steamed rice dumplings.

Moran pushed Sangtan to Chu Beijie’s feet, reporting, “Duke, there’s a short crossbow hidden in his sleeves. So evil, there’s even a little poison on them. If they were launched from a close distance, most people wouldn’t be able to dodge.

A muffled thump. The crossbow and arrow were thrown onto the sun-baked mud, sending a gentle cloud of yellow dust into the air.

Chu Beijie’s gaze rested on Sangtan’s head. Sangtan was trembling. His parents and wife, behind the city gates, had told him to never beg to live in front of Chu Beijie, or he would undoubtedly be killed. It would be better if he acted more stubborn, didn’t change his original will. “Chu Beijie, you do know that once the two princes are gone, then the next in line for Dong Lin’s throne is you? What a simple plan, how can the King just not see it? Let me tell you, the House of Zhen-Bei has been fired and everything you have once owned has been taken back by the King! It’s such a damn pain that I’m just a scholar and doesn’t know how to be cruel enough to pull that poisoned arrow on the crossbow.”

Chu Beijie ignored his mad dog-like words, just frowning as he looked at dark

green arrow heads. “This arrow, is it the King’s request?” He asked faintly.

“Hmph! If it weren’t for the King being your brother, he wouldn’t have been unable to bear killing you. He hopes that you’d come to the Royal Residence to clear up any misunderstanding, if any, but how could I just waste all these opportunities to avenge for them?” Sangtan’s face was full of remorse and anger.

Chu Beijie’s voice was disdainful. “Once you shot the arrow out, no matter whether I died or not, you are in the midst of ten thousands of soldiers, so you’ll surely die a brutal death immediately afterwards. You couldn’t dare do it in the end, in fear of death, which is okay, but you even went as far to say such ridiculous words.”

Sangtan’s old face flushed bright red and widened his eyes like a frog. He rolled his eyes, but couldn’t say anything to defend himself.

Chu Beijie’s hands were behind his back, his eyes not even looking at Sangtan as he continued, “I really am one of the most suspicious people to the death of the two princes, but why would the King think that I’m the one who did it?”

Sangtan acted stubborn, refusing to say a word.

Moran coolly told him, “Senior Official of the Left has never worked with military troops and knows next to nothing about the rules of the barracks. When we meet uncooperative prisoners, they’re stripped of their clothes and left to our brothers to have some fun, then tortured.”

Sangtan’s face paled all of a sudden.

There were no women in the army and this meant that the several thousand soldiers had to suffer abstinence for several months on end. Anyone could guess what “have some fun” meant. The torture was already bad enough, but if he was stripped to be shamed like that, even if he died, he didn’t have the face to see his ancestors. He was trembling once more, no longer trying to be brave.

“Speak.” Chu Beijie stood on the spot, as if nothing had happened.

Sangtan’s sweat oozed out, resentment in his eyes as he glared at Moran. Through gritted teeth, he said, “Does the Duke really think that his poison plan was immaculate? The King got the spy immediately that night and after

strenuous torture, he confessed to be a spy from Bei Mo. The person who'd given him the poison was a girl named Bai Pingting. Hmph, isn't that the woman that you loved?"

Moran was stunned and jerked his head to see Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie was still as a rock, no one could see his expression. The army was quiet too, no one dared to cough. They stared at their general.

Under the shadow of the last of the dwindling light of sunset, Chu Beijie quietly asked, "Moran, what do you think of the current situation?"

For some reason, even Moran was so nervous that both his hands shook. He kneeled, in an alarmed tone. "If Sangtan's saying the truth, then it might be hard for the King to stop suspecting the Duke."

Suddenly, the plains were overcome with silence.

The other commanders in front noted every word of Chu Beijie and Moran's conversation.

"Do you believe that I'd kill the two princes?"

"No."

"Would the King believe so?"

Moran hesitated for a moment, then resolutely said, "The King would believe it. According to the royal hierarchy, if the King doesn't have any sons, then Duke would be next in line. The person who put poisoned them was Pingting, who has connections with Duke. Now that the Duke also returns with the army, how could the King not suspect you?"

Chu Beijie raised his eyes to see that night had approached, that even the last scrap of light had gone. "You can see how much pressure the King is under. If we enter the city, we and all people related to us will be captured and killed, for the sake of Dong Lin's peace. Even if I were the King of Dong Lin, I would do the same."

Thump, thump. After a few thumps, all the people behind him were kneeling, face solemn.

Commander Shenwei said, "I don't mind going into the city gates myself to

convince the King that Duke is innocent. I can swear on all of my ancestors and living family that this is the truth.”

“I’m also willing to swear that Duke is innocent!” The crowd’s vows echoed in the heavy sky.

“You’ve accompanied me through battle for all sorts of years. The King is even suspecting me, so how can he not think badly of all of you? Going into the city only means immediate death. Our only two options are death. Either going into the city, it’s fine if I get punished, but the Dong Lin army’s spirit will be significantly diminished due to the lack of the main general. Even though Dong Lin is famous for many strong warriors in the past, perhaps now it won’t even have enough power to defend itself. However, if we don’t enter the city, the King may interpret this as rebellion.

Moran was the most loyal. He had been an orphan and had accompanied Chu Beijie since young. He clenched his teeth fiercely. “Entering is impossible, but not entering is impossible too. Since the King’s suspicious, he won’t forgive Duke. It’s a real dilemma. Another option is to take the troops and invade the city, after all, Duke is the next inheritor of the throne.”

“Invading the capital isn’t difficult as all of the best soldiers are under my control. That’s another reason why the King wants to eliminate me.” Chu Beijie shook his head, “But even if we invaded the capital, killed the King and took the throne, what would happen to the people of Dong Lin? Once the royal family is a mess, the peasants’ hearts are troubled and the officials will have varying opinions. Other countries would take the opportunity to invade as well. Do we really want Dong Lin to be slaughtered by an enemy country?”

That was enough to make Moran lower his head.

The crowd all knew that Chu Beijie had other considerations. They didn’t dare interrupt, just kneeled on the ground without a word.

The winds of the plain were ever more aggressive, causing the flag to beat against its pole yet the ten thousands of troops waited in silence, for their main general to make a decision.

“To harm me, she didn’t even mind revealing that she was the murderess. Even if it was in Dong Lin, she didn’t care at all...” He slowly turned back, the corners

of his mouth hooked into a bitter smile. “Not only did she manage to send Dong Lin into chaos, even caused Bei Mo to be a sworn enemy of Dong Lin. Nice, nice tactic.” He laughed bitterly for a little longer, then stopped, his expression freezing in place. His gaze was far into the battlefield of a thousand miles, an expression he would’ve been disdainful in the past. He shouted loudly, “All commanders, listen to my order!”

“Here!”

“Immediately attack the city. After taking out the city walls, don’t attack anyone who doesn’t resist. Shoo all of the peasants into their houses and tie up the nobles, and wait for further instructions.” Chu Beijie barked out another order, “Commander Shenwei!”

“I’m here!”

“Once the city is captured, you lead ten thousand soldiers who are responsible for keeping order in the city. Station troops to monitor around the Royal Residence and the residences of important officials, strictly forbidding people to enter.”

“Yes!”

“Commander Shenyong!”

“I’m here!”

“Once the city is captured, you lead twenty thousand soldiers and guard the city walls. Absolutely no one is allowed to escape, so that no news of the city’s capture can be leaked.”

“Yes!”

“Commander Shenwu, you come with me. Surround the Royal Residence when we fight our way in, to see the King.”

“Yes!”

Despite the series of orders, Chu Beijie’s expression was calm as he strategized. He had a faint smile on his lips as he glanced around at his generals. “This is for Dong Lin and for self-protection. Everyone remember this, this time isn’t the same as previous attacks. The strongest soldiers are already on our side

so the other guards should be intimidated enough already. It should be easy to get the city under our control, so kill as less as possible.”

“We’ll obey the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s orders at all costs!”

Under the night sky, the black figures of the army quickly approached the capital city of Dong Lin, like a stealthy snake.

Translation Notes

- See his ancestors: Paying respects to your ancestors is considered to be a very important practice in China. It is often believed that you meet your ancestors when you die and if you lead a good life, you can join them. Modern Chinese atheists might not believe this, but they may also use it as an expression when they feel that their guilt/shame will follow them for life.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 25

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch25

Battle cries were heard on this night of a full moon. The King's own brother had decided to do something on this night to Dong Lin, just rebel ever so slightly.

The King of Dong Lin was standing at a high point of the Royal Residence, watching the dragon-like flames, in the night sky, that were rapidly approaching. He heard the fighting.

"King!" A guard soaked in blood hurried over. "The Royal Residence has been invaded by traitors. It's not safe to stay here, please escape King!"

The Queen and a crowd of family stood, faces drained of colour. The Queen was still wearing mourning clothes and had her head bowed gracefully. "He's already killed my sons and now he plot to kill us. As of now, his troops are guarding the city. Where else can we go?" She turned to the King, kneeling while crying, "King, I'm sorry but I do not wish to suffer humiliation. As the Royal House is broken, please may King allow me to tie a noose."

"No, King!" Many maids who had followed the Queen for several years knelt down, crying hard.

All of a sudden, the main room was full of crying sounds.

The King of Dong Lin slowly looked back, saying, "Chu Lei."

"Chu Lei is here, King."

The Dong Lin King pondered for a while, then suddenly asked, "How are the peasants?"

“King?”

“My younger brother, did he massacre normal civilians?”

“The rebel army entered the city and ordered everyone to stay in their homes. They’re forbidden to look outside too, so the soldiers aren’t entering the houses either. They didn’t plan to create much chaos so lives haven’t been lost.”

The King slowly nodded, asking another question. “What about the officials? Have the ones that don’t get along with brother been killed yet?”

Chu Lei could hear the sounds of battle approaching rapidly, but the King seemed to have no intention of hiding, seemingly wasting time here without a trace of expression. But he still had his duty as an official to fulfill, so he answered with a frown. “I heard that the officials’ residences have been guarded. The traitor knows the officials well and I heard that he captures one whenever he sees one. I don’t know where they’re being kept, or whether they’re still alive. King, time is precious, please leave immediately.”

“Where can I leave?” The Dong Lin King laughed bitterly. “I knew this would happen ever since ordering Senior Officer of the Left to meet Chu Beijie outside the gates. I trusted our brotherhood and gave him all the military power, so it’s sort of my fault? Alas, my Dong Lin is in imminent danger right now so I can only hope...”

He hadn’t quite finished when the clamour abruptly increased. It was as if the fight was in front of them, but it suddenly stopped.

Everything was so strangely quiet and everyone’s heart seemed to sink at the same time.

Bang! The door flew open and a small, trembling eunuch ran in, stuttering, “King, reporting to King....h-h-h-he...”

The Queen paled ever more, her heart understand the situation, but she seemed to have calmed down. She wiped her eyes and stood up, slapping the little eunuch. In a cold voice, she said, “Only report when something is important and when reporting, report clearly and precisely. What’s wrong?” She lowered her hand, her fingers clenched tightly to reveal her whitish joints.

Half of the small eunuch’s face was swollen, but his articulation really seemed

to get better. “Servant should be punished, servant should be punished. Reporting to King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei wishes to see you.”

Although they knew that the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s troops had already invaded, but hearing his name right now caused the assembled crowd to shudder.

The Queen’s tone was mournful. “It’s better to come himself, so that he can personally kill his elder brother and his wife.”

“King!” The white haired Senior Official of the Right Wing, Chu Zairan, suddenly yelped, throwing himself at the Dong Lin King’s feet, crying. “Back then I begged King to have stricter orders on the Duke of Zhen-Bei, so that he would never rebel. King only sent out Sangtan because it was too heartbreaking for King to meet him personally. As Your Majesty can see, he has indeed caused much trouble for Dong Lin. Please listen to what I have to say and if King doesn’t listen, I’ll kill myself immediately beneath King’s feet.”

The King of Dong Lin sighed, “Why cry, I understand. The children of my beloved are lost, leaving a bunch of clues pointing at my brother. I was just temporarily blinded by the fact that he has led troops to invade the city, causing chaos. Thanks for the reminder Mister, but see, there’s no point in killing my two sons if he could’ve just taken me off my throne with his military power.”

“King!” The Queen was exasperated. “Doesn’t King believe that Chu Beijie has a true wild ambition? The person who killed my princes must be him. Why hasn’t King realised it by now?”

“By now, I’m no longer confused.” The King of Dong Lin lowered his voice to the Queen and looked at Chu Zairan, who was crying on the ground. He sighed, “But the political situation has changed and it’s impossible to recover. Go ahead and say whatever you wanted to.”

Chu Zairan’s body trembled and he gritted his teeth. “I’ll be bold, please Order to crown the Duke of Zhen-Bei.”

“What? Are you crazy?” The others were shocked, overflowing emotions.

“Chu Zairan, do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Mr Chu, please take that back. You must be too old!”

“I’m not crazy, King.” Chu Zairan raised his head at the quiet Dong Lin King, tears streaking out of his old eyes. “The four countries have been at war for many years, the Dong Lin army has attacked four times, causing deep resentment. Their army is very strong, while the rest of our country is weak, therefore if the army were gone, the first country to be destroyed is our Dong Lin. To protect our Dong Lin, please give up the throne, King, to avoid further internal conflict. I...I know these words are traitorous and I know punishment is death, but I’m willing to die.” He thumped his head against the stone floor for a few times and fresh blood increasingly spilled with every thump, until his head was completely bloodied.

White hair and bloody expression, fierceness in desolation.

The Queen, who was so used to scold others, could no longer bear looking at him either.

There was no sound in the main room. The small eunuch was still kneeling on the floor, though fidgeting. He shyly said, “King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei...is still waiting outside.”

The crowd’s hearts were inspired despite the silence in the main room. It was like the calm before the storm, separated by a heavy wall and who knew what hell was waiting after that wall came down.

The Dong Lin King sighed heavily. “Fine, get him to come in then. The Queen should go with the others to the back. Senior Official of the Right, please stay behind.”

“King...” The Queen slowly breathed out.

“Queen, you may go.”

The group of maids helped the Queen to leave, leaving only the King of Dong Lin and Chu Zairan in the large main room. Not long later, they heard the entrance being softly pushed back and the harsh light of fire entered their eyes. In a flash, the flame was gone and the large entrance was closed once more.

There was a person in front of them, in dust-ridden armour. His face was handsome and his presence was imposing. His hand was at his sword as he sighed, “Older brother must be feeling pretty bad, seeing Beijie.” Yes, he was the

Duke of Zhen-Bei, who the King of Dong Lin had given military powers to.

Seeing no response from the Dong Lin King, Chu Beijie chuckled sadly. “The feeling Beijie felt when seeing Brother’s Order, isn’t it similar to what Brother is feeling now?”

“As it has become a big mistake, then there’s no point regretting it anymore.” The King of Dong Lin looked away, faintly saying to Chu Zairan, “Senior Official of the Right, start drafting.”

“Yes, King.” Chu Zairan took up his pen, trembled for a while, then put down the pen. He had been writing orders for the King for decades and therefore had a lot of experience. He could even write a long scroll without pause, only stopping his pen when finished. This time however, the paper was full of his tears and blurred the characters many times.

Chu Zairan put down the pen and handed in to the King of Dong Lin with both hands. “King...please seal it...” His voice was choked.

The Dong Lin King looked blankly at Chu Beijie. Their brotherly relationship was affectionate and they always laughed cheerily at national affairs, who knew how the situation ended up like today. He took out the jade seal, the King’s Seal and pressed it down on the Order. He gave the Order and the jade Seal to Chu Zairan, forcedly laughing, “Give these to the next ruler of Dong Lin.”

Chu Beijie just stood quietly in the distance. He hadn’t spoken a single word since Chu Zairan picked up his pen, as if he had become a statue due to a curse. His eyes were impossible to decipher as he studied every movement of the large hall.

Receiving the Order from the King with both hands, Chu Beijie was silent for a while, then suddenly raised his head, “Hey Brother, in exchange for the throne, could I ask for two things instead?”

The Dong Lin King turned to him, lips moving to form one word, “Speak.”

“Brother just needs to promise to not pursue this invasion and let Dong Lin be like usual.” Chu Beijie said, “As for me, I’m absolutely sick of this. I don’t ever want to appear in caught again, please allow me to retire.”

“Did you really think that I would agree to not chasing a traitor?”

Chu Beijie nodded his head, full of trust. “Condemning all of the traitorous troops with badly damage Dong Lin’s military power, provoking greater evil. Brother must have wanted to avoid too many people losing their lives, so almost giving up the throne, right? Sigh, although I’m an incomparable general, even a Duke, I’m nothing compared to Brother’s great heart.”

The King of Dong Lin gazed at Chu Beijie, “What’s the other thing that brother wanted?”

Chu Beijie’s face twitched in pain.

“In the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, there’s a small building in the east. On the table inside, there’s...” he lowered his voice, “a guqin.”

Translation Notes

- Eunuch: A manservant or slave that has been castrated.
- Tie a noose: Commit suicide by hanging.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 26

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch26

The transfer of governing rights to Dong Lin had occurred twice in its capital city and only selected few understood the shocking events.

Early on the next morning, the peasants cautiously came out of their rooms. They had hid as requested all night. Despite the endless fire and sound of battle, the King was still the King and the Royal Residence was still the Royal Residence.

The staff was assured safety while the imprisoned officials were brought to the Royal Residence. The King of Dong Lin summoned them one by one, not scolding them but praising them, such as the Senior Official of the Right's draft had called for help instead.

Everyone knew what this implied and was beyond delighted.

Apart from a few who stubbornly resisted during the invasion, there weren't many injuries and deaths, but the King issued a pension for their families anyway.

The mighty Dong Lin troops remained behind, but the famous general, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, had already parted.

Out on the yellow-mud paths, a group of carriages, without flags, slowly moved ahead.

There were carriages and horses in the group. The riders' faces were distant, obviously unwilling, and light rarely seemed to enter their eyes. Two of the carriages in the middle were for women and children, while the other two's contents were unknown but they were seemingly heavy, as the tyres left deep tracks in the mud.

One of the carriages wasn't decorated very magnificently, but it seemed expensive enough, as its frame and its wheels were made out of extremely rare, good wood. Simple but generous.

After a long night, inside the carriage, Chu Beijie currently had his eyes closed.

Dong Lin's trouble was over. After this incident, the King of Dong Lin would no longer suspect him of killing the two princes.

But a father had lost his son, an older brother had lost his younger brother, while Dong Lin no longer had the general who protected the country.

Dong Lin would have to deal with the terrible consequences for many years to come. Even Chu Beijie didn't dare imagine.

But the poison came from her hands.

Chu Beijie lifted his hands, looking at the thick, thick calluses caused by wielding his sword too much. He remembered her hands, her slender fingers, white and delicate. Hands that touched the qin, picked flowers and could also minister poison.

"The most poisonous of all...is really a woman's heart after all?" He narrowed his inky black eyes.

Not wishing to let anyone see the depth of his eyes, he closed them, lost in thought. After a while, his breathing evened and gradually, he seemed to be sleeping.

The road was bumpy up and down, causing the carriage to jump. Step by step it moved, further away from the past.

The driver of the carriage seemed to have hit a rock and was momentarily caught off balance. Chu Beijie's regular breathing stopped and he straightened his back. Then, as if all feeling came back, he called, "Stop the carriage."

He pushed open the carriage curtain and his body began to shake.

On the side of the road, there was a delicate figure. One hand patted the horse while the other held its reins by her side, touching the tips of the uncut grass. Heaving the group stop, she turned to look at them, revealing a stunned expression, rather than shocked, when seeing Chu Beijie's face. She gently

exclaimed, "Duke, Pingting has come as promised."

Not only Chu Beijie, but also the people travelling with him, was frozen like wood carvings. Bai Pingting's red mouth smiled breezily. "To be honest, Pingting has been worried for a while, as I don't know how to meet up with Duke, so I had to wait on the road. If Duke ended up passing Pingting, then that meant our destiny has ended. I did also go to Dong Lin, but it seems that Duke no longer has any connection to it from now on."

Chu Beijie's gaze didn't leave Pingting's smiling face. He lowered his voice, "I realised."

"Then..." Bai Pingting articulated her words clearly, "Bai Pingting is now a person of the Chu family."

"A person of the Chu family?"

"Duke has forgotten? Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other."

Chu Beijie's repeated every word coldly, with a pause after each word. "Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other?"

Bai Pingting's eyes were as pretty as their first meeting. "Has Duke forgotten our promise?"

"I remember." Chu Beijie nodded his head.

"That promise still stands," Bai Pingting gracefully walked towards him, holding up her hand. "Please let Pingting follow Duke to the ends of the earth, my honour is decided by Duke and my death decided by Duke."

Chu Beijie eyed the familiar, small white hand in sight. He could easily touch it.

He had touched this hand no less than a thousand times, enjoying its touch while praising it. He remembered its warmth and its smoothness, agile and delicate.

He never thought about it before, but they were also a cunning pair of hands, that seemed to be able to flip clouds and beckon rain at will.

Pingting was not surprised or afraid, just stood obediently facing him. Just like before, singing about beautiful women and heroes and soldiers knowing fraud. Her crystal eyes were still able to talk, light shining in all four corners.

Chu Beijie was silent for a long time and he finally broke the silence, saying, "Pingting, answer a few of my questions."

"Go ahead, Duke."

"The drug used by the spy from Bei Mo, was he working under your command?"

"Yes." Bai Pingting's expression didn't change, just articulating one word.

"You know that they were Dong Lin's princes, my very own nephews?"

Bai Pingting looked at him, the light in her eyes flashed as she sighed, "I know."

"Do you remember that you swore not to hurt my family."

"I remember."

"I, Chu Beijie, am not a man who'd give up revenge for his own family, just for a woman"

Bai Pingting could hear Chu Beijie's anger and a sad smile played on her lips. "I understand. Pingting understands everything Duke says. As Duke wants to find Pingting, there's no point in Pingting trying to hide, so Duke can do whatever he wants."

"One final question." Chu Beijie hesitated, sternly asking, "You knew that you'd die anyway, but why set a boulder to disturb my journey?"

Bai Pingting's heart felt as if it had been stabbed. Her body suddenly swayed a little, while her talkative eyes quietly watched Chu Beijie. Her voice was sad. "Pingting is an idiot, but Duke is an idiot too. Even if I speak until my mouth's dry, would Duke believe a word? Everything has already become a big mistake, we won't ever go back to the way we were." Not being able to say another word, tears slid down her cheeks and onto the ground.

Sunset.

There were no corpses on the dry yellow road.

A slender, silent figure joined the silent group of carriages and horses.

Chu Beijie realised that hands that hold onto both heart and sword, are not always without conflict.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 1 Chapter 27

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol01 Ch27 (Intermission)

Bei Mo's first snow came in the middle of the November.

General Ze Yin chose this time to enter the Royal Residence, to report his retirement from military to the King of Bei Mo.

"Why so sudden?" The Bei Mo King was no longer interested in admiring the snow all of a sudden, as he turned to gape at Ze Yin.

Ze Yin replied, "The danger at the frontier has now passed, so Ze Yin should also fulfill his promise with Yangfeng."

"No longer participating in military affairs so that you can accompany your wife till old, while watching nature unfold itself over the years, am I right? Such a gentlemanly promise." The King of Bei Mo turned away, refusing to say any more. After a while, he finally added, "Does Yangfeng still bear a grudge over the poisoning of Dong Lin's two princes."

Ze Yin sighed heavily, lowering his voice. "A women's kindness should not interfere with national affairs anyway. It's not King's fault."

"So it seems that she still bears a grudge against me. Pity, nothing can replace a good friend." The Bei Mo King had bitter smile as he nodded, "What else could I say? Oh well, oh well. General Ze Yin, you may leave."

The Main General's Residence in Bei Mo, in the midst of snowy skies and earth, had its sign pulled away from above its main entrance, the sign that the King of Bei Mo had personally written.

Ze Yin's intentions in resigning had long been hinted within the residence as

the crowd of servants had been with him for many years and were all fiercely loyal. Wherever Ze Yin went, they would follow, so even when news was proved officially, the Residence was calm like usual. Everyone seemed to have mutual understanding as they all packed their luggage themselves without being asked, getting ready to leave Bei Yali.

The snow continued to fall for seven days, no trace of stopping.

The road to leave Bei Yali was snowy white, while only a small group of carriages ambled on it. The carriage wheels pressed against the snow, leaving two long tracks.

One of the most decorated carriages in the middle, a small stove was alit. Yangfeng had her head lowered, looking at the baby in her arms. This child had far too much energy, just like his father, who only slept after much coaxing.

A sweet smile formed at her lips as she put the baby on a tiny blanket, wrapping him up carefully. Yangfeng softly sneezed as she sat by the window.

“Asleep?” Ze Yin moved in to face the two, carefully examining the sleeping child. He was used to picking up swords and killing, but seeing this delicate, newborn baby, he could only think that he would hurt him whenever he tried to cuddle him. He felt more afraid at his first time being a father than his first time being on the battlefield.

Yangfeng saw his expression and startled to chuckle softly, moving close to him, watching their child together. In a loving voice, she said, “Look at his nose and his little mouth. He looks just like a little Ze Yin.”

“His face looks like his mother’s.” Ze Yin was joyous, “The son looks like the mother. He definitely has a promising future. Yangfeng, it’s all thanks to you.”

Yangfeng was stunned. “Thanks to me?”

“It’s all thanks to you, otherwise, how was I going to have such a cute son?”

“What are you saying?” Yangfeng was both angry and pleased. Not wanting to wake the baby, she tugged at Ze Yin’s sleeve. The two sat quietly on their seats, which were cushioned with thick fur. Yangfeng lowered her voice, “Does Husband think I’m too stubborn?”

“Why would I?”

“Yangfeng forced Husband to leave his post as the Main General, even leaving Bei Yali to settle down elsewhere. Yangfeng forced you to leave even though the snow hasn’t stopped, not to mention that Qing’er isn’t a month yet either. Having said that, that was far too stubborn of me.”

Ze Yin laughed, his voice deep and soft, while his large, rough hand stroked Yangfeng’s face. He asked, “Is there anyone else who could force me, Ze Yin, to retire? Retirement and leaving Bei Yali was all your wish. As it’s your wish, I would definitely do so, willingly.” He paused, his voice softening. “Besides, I know that you’re still feeling uneasy about what happened to Pingting. Although the rewards from the King kept coming, you seemed even more on edge each time.”

At the mention of Pingting, Yangfeng’s face turned sorrowful. In a low voice, she said, “Yesterday night, I dreamed of Pingting. She was standing in front of me, not smiling, not speaking. I reached out to touch her, but she was like a shadow, something I couldn’t touch. Ze Yin, I had to beg Pingting to think of a plan for Bei Mo.”

“I know.” Ze Yin pulled Yangfeng into his arms, pain flashing in his eyes. “My country, Bei Mo, owes her deeply, yet they pushed all of the blame for killing Dong Lin’s two princes on her. Ze Yin is far too ashamed to face her.”

“She’s not willing to clear the misunderstanding either.” Yangfeng was distraught. “Ever since you searched up where Chu Beijie was living, I’ve already sent someone to pass on my letters, telling her to clear up everything with Chu Beijie, that He Xia was the one who killed Chu Beijie’s two nephews. But she hasn’t sent anything back to me.”

“She should be under house arrest right now. Could the letters we sent, weren’t delivered to her, but were collected by Chu Beijie’s people?”

Yangfeng shook her head, “Isn’t it better for Chu Beijie to see them? But the Dong Lin army doesn’t seem to be pursuing He Xia right now, meaning it’s highly likely they still don’t know what He Xia did. I reckon Chu Beijie is too arrogant, that’s why he’s not stopping or peeking at Pingting’s letters. I’m just afraid, what if Pingting doesn’t plan to plead innocent?”

Ze Yin's thick eyebrows creased, not understanding, "Since she knows that He Xia has changed, why is she still willing to be punished in place of him?"

Yangfeng seemed to feel a little cold, shifting her position in Ze Yin's arms, until she was able to hear her husband's heartbeat more strongly. Her gaze was fixed on the sleeping child not far away, as she sighed softly. "Being disappointed in someone is one thing, but hating them is another. Pingting knows this very well, that the moment she says the truth, He Xia will immediately become the most wanted criminal of Dong Lin. How is that any different from personally killing him? Their friendships built over the past fifteen years won't be broken so easily."

Yangfeng's voice got softer and softer, as if her thoughts were even more problematic than before. She hesitated for a long time, before continuing, "I'm just worried that since she's so clever, instead of trying to solve the misunderstanding, she'd use this to test Chu Beijie's feelings for her instead. Sigh, just how can a man's heart be tested?"

Ze Yin heard the sadness in her tone. He was very worried that she'd get sick, as it hadn't been more than fifty days since she gave birth and there were too many worries on her mind. Patting her shoulder lovingly, he assured her. "Don't think about it too much. Although I've retired, it's not like I don't have any influence. If Pingting has any needs, we can definitely help her."

"I hope that god will protect Pingting." Yangfeng pressed her hands together at her chest, praying.

Ze Yin's group of carriages advanced slowly on the snow-covered ground, while the sky was full of fireworks outside the Royal Residence of the country of Yun Chang.

The Royal Residence was covered in red silk, while the maids were all dressed in grand, festive gowns, flowed in and out of the room like water, bringing in all sorts of colourful desserts.

The joyful sound of drums travelled from within the Royal Residence to the outside neighbourhood, causing the peasants of Yun Chang to gather and discuss.

"Princess is going to marry!"

“Heh, our Yun Chang finally has a prince consort?”

“There should’ve been a prince consort ages ago. Although the Princess is pretty clever, but as a woman, it’s not that good to meddle with politics too much right? It’s better to find a husband and settle down, giving birth to a son too.”

“Hahaha, that makes sense.”

“Having said that, our Princess has quite a good taste. Ever since the King died, the number of people proposing suddenly increased, almost enough to trample down the Royal Residence’s door. The Princess refused everyone, but chose this one.”

“Yeah! Yeah! As expected of our Yun Chang’s Princess, to have such good taste. With him as the Prince Consort, our Yun Chang no longer has to be afraid of Dong Lin’s Chu Beijie and Bei Mo’s Ze Yin! Hahaha, come, let’s cheer for the Princess and the Prince Consort with a little wine!”

The mellow wine gushed freely out of their containers.

Gui Changqing crossed through the crowds of butterfly-like maids, while wearing a heavy yet grand courtier dress, towards a small, peaceful building in the western part of the Royal Residence

The most influential maid of the Yun Chang Royal Residence, Luyi, happened to be standing at the entrance, while instructing two maids. “Get the gift, Double Golden Phoenix Belt, sent a few days ago. Also, go get some dry hawthorn and remember to place them in the red plates. There are two plates, each one gets exactly ninety-nine slices of dry hawthorn. Remember, ninety-nine slices, no more, no less. I’m making this clear, today is an important day, if any of you dare make a mistake, watch out for your leg.” She said this all in one breath and when she turned around, seeing Gui Changqing, she hurriedly smiled. “Senior Official Gui, please come in, Princess has been waiting for a while, but Senior Official just hadn’t come yet. It wasn’t going to be long until the Princess was going to welcome My Lady.

Gui Changqing smiled modestly, stepping into the room.

The smell of incense lingered in the room. Although outside was full of joyous

music, here, it was all just unclear, residual sounds. Reaching the curtains, she saw a thin figure sitting alone in front of the mirror through them.

Gui Changqing already heard Princess Yaotian's familiar, crisp voice before she drew back the curtains. "Please come in, Senior Official."

Gui Changqing pushed the curtains back, walking until she was standing in front of the mirror.

The Princess in the mirror had long surpassed her usual glamorous appearance. A coronet, studded with many gems, had been placed neatly on her head. Below, she was wearing a chain of pearls, that wouldn't stop shaking, but none of this managed to block out the shining light in her eyes.

Princess Yaotian put down the eyebrow pencil in her hand, studying herself carefully in the bronze mirror. She joked, softly, "Senior Official, has Yaotian dressed up prettily enough?"

Gui Changqing looked at her attentively, nodding. "Absolutely stunning." There was a pause. Then, as if there was something she had to say, she gave a long sigh. "Princess is finally going to marry. The little girl who liked to make all of the Residence's maids run after her, until they were breathless, is soon to have a husband. Time sure flies. Is Princess happy?"

"Happy and worried at the same time." Yaotian looked at herself in the mirror. "When Mother was still alive, she said that marrying was like reaching into a black hole. There isn't a way to tell whether what you pull out is a rare treasure, or a deadly snake. Senior Official is the most loyal official of Yun Chang's Royal House. If it hadn't been for Senior Official's help ever since Father died, I would've never been able to deal with national affairs. I want to ask Senior Official a question, so please give me a truthful reply."

Gui Changqing replied in a distinct voice, "Go ahead, Princess."

"When I chose He Xia, the officials and peasants were happy but why was Senior Official so worried about it for several days?"

Gui Changqing hadn't thought that Princess Yaotian would ask such a thing and she looked a little stunned, only replying after much thinking. "The King died early, not leaving a son. Princess is ruling the political court as a woman and

everyone understands that whoever marries Princess will be the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, who can do whatever they want to with Yun Chang. That's why I was constantly warning Princess to be careful when choosing a husband, not someone useless who would bring Yun Chang to its destruction."

"He Xia is useless?"

"Though Princess is perceptive too. He Xia is currently framed and hunted by the King of Gui Le, and needs a refuge."

"Although his family is ruined now, he did come from a good family, so his behaviour is extremely graceful, not to mention his rare talents. In this period where the prospect of war is constantly hanging around, like a cloud, warriors were the most valuable of all. Princess agreeing to marriage at this time is like bring a steel barrier to our Yun Chang. But..." Gui Changqing shook her head, her voice soft, "He's too powerful, too ambitious. It's not going to be easy to keep this man beside for long periods of time."

Princess Yaotian lowered her head, thinking. In a hesitant voice, she asked, "If so, why didn't Senior Official tell me in the past? I would always consider Senior Official's opinions."

"Even if I said so, would Princess' decision be changed?" Gui Changqing sighed, "I've been serving for twenty years and have known Princess since birth. How could I not see if Princess had already hardened her heart to iron, firmly decided such a thing?"

Princess Yaotian sucked her lips, thinking, then smiling. "As expected of Senior Official. It's true that I wouldn't have changed my opinion. From the moment He Xia stepped into the Royal Residence, I had already decided that I wouldn't marry anyone else. What kind of girl doesn't want to marry a man, who's worthy of being called a hero? Not to mention that there are far too less heroes, even if you're lucky to meet one, you don't dare to hope for too much."

She stood up, the accessories in her hair jangling.

"But Senior Official is right too, I have to work hard to keep that man by my side." Yaotian turned around to look at Gui Changqing, revealing an innocent smirk. "Senior Official, you can help me think of how to keep He Xia's heart."

Gui Changqing bowed, "I'll put all my heart into it."

"Very good." Yaotian shuffled towards the door, facing the other side of the Royal Residence, muttering to herself. "The music's nearer. He Xia...he should've already reached the entrance of the main hall right?"

In yet another distant country, in the Royal Residence of Gui Le, He Su was silent as he looked at the grey sky.

The Queen approached from behind, inquiring, "After seeing the letter, King seems to look worried. Was it really bad news?"

He Su nodded. "Princess Yaotian of Yun Chang has agreed to He Xia's marriage proposal and they will get married today."

The Queen gaped. "Princess Yaotian actually agreed to marry He Xia, who has nothing? Why is she so unwise?"

"It's a good decision." He Su looked back, briefly meeting the Queen's eyes. "He Xia doesn't have nothing. His biggest riches are inside himself. In this world, lots of people have external riches, but those with internal riches are rare. Princess Yaotian saw, and took fancy at this point."

The Queen could hear the accusation in his voice and lowered her head obediently. "As King is annoyed, I shall play a piece," she whispered.

"No need." He Su stood by the window, locating the general direction of when the Jing-An Ducal Residence once stood, muttering, "What else have I done wrong? Gui Le's two renowned qin players no longer belong to Gui Le now."

Yangfeng had left exactly because the Queen had believed in gossip, and had decided to dispose of her. Hearing He Su mention her, the Queen's heart squeezed in shock. "That was due to my stupidity. I'm willing to accept all punishment." She raised her long dress and kneeled down, head lowered.

He Su was silent for a long time. Another thought seemingly crossed his mind, as he suddenly began to laugh. "You may get up, Queen."

He turned around, helping the Queen to stand. His voice was a little pleased as he said, "Yangfeng's qin skills may be spectacular, but she's just a woman of the harem. If we were to talk about strategising, she's nothing compared to Bai

Pingting. Never mind losing Yangfeng, I'm surprised that He Xia would give up on Bai Pingting for some temporary interest. He'll have to pay a heavy price in the future."

The Queen was suddenly suspicious, "Is Bai Pingting really that amazing?"

"Has Queen met Bai Pingting before?"

The Queen tried to recall her. "She rarely entered the Royal Residence, I've only seen her once or twice. She doesn't like to talk, and her looks are average."

"Bai Pingting may not be a beauty, but she has a different sort of charm, causing people to want to stay with her, have her forever." He Su looked at the Queen, a trace of a smile on his lips. "Men can easily fall in love with beautiful women and it's easy to be entertained by them, but just how many women are worthy enough so that a man would want to stay by her side forever?"

"Doesn't that mean He Xia has given up?"

"He Xia will regret it, maybe he has already regretted it, but what use is that?" He Su narrowed his eyes, a harsh light seemed to rise from the pits of his pupils. "I won't let him get Bai Pingting back so easily."

After dinner, He Su stayed behind in the main hall, sorting national affairs. The Queen excused herself.

Bumping into the corner of a side hall, the Queen stopped, wiping her tears away with her sleeve.

The Queen's nurse, Mother Cheng Xiang, who happened to accompany her, was shocked. "What's wrong, Queen?"

"The King's fallen in love."

"With who?"

"Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence."

Mother Cheng Xiang was silent.

When the King ordered to get rid of the House of Jing-An, he had privately requested for He Xia and Bai Pingting to enter the Royal Residence. It was strictly ordered that if the House of Jing-An and their followers reacted, they were to be

killed immediately. Only one person had to survive, not to be injured.

Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

The wedding chamber was well decorated and inside, the bride's cheeks were shiny red.

A red scarf softly fell from to the ground, as if picked by a light breeze, and a handsome man entered her eyes.

One of the noblest men of the four countries, the famous Marquess of Jing-An, was standing in front of her.

"Princess."

"Prince Consort."

Their whispers were barely audible and when their eyes met, her hearts wouldn't stop thumping messily.

He Xia untied the red flower strap on his chest and took off Princess Yaotian's coronet with both hands, smiling while sighing. "He Xia didn't expect that ever since being homeless, that he'd be so fortunate to earn the Princess' favour, when no one else was willing to help him. God really isn't unfair to me." He smiled gently, taking in Yaotian's quiet face. "Perhaps Princess has other worrying things in mind?"

Yaotian giggled guiltily, replying, "I'm just thinking, if the House of Jing-An hadn't perished, then would Yaotian still have been blessed enough to be the wife of Husband or not." Tears dripped from her eyes and stopped, hanging down from the frame of the bed. She sighed, "It's the night of the wedding chamber and the man in front of me is talented both literarily and militarily, a true hero. It's just like a really good dream, so I'm a little afraid that it's just a dream."

He Xia frowned, "Why say that Princess, do you not believe in the loyalty in He Xia's heart?"

"Oh, slip of the tongue." Princess Yaotian turned back, smiling sweetly at He Xia. "If I didn't believe in Husband, then why else would I have vowed to always stay together?"

He Xia's starry eyes studied Yaotian carefully, his two pupils were like pools with a magical pull and it made Yaotian feel as if she was sucked in. He was on one knee in front Princess Yaotian, as he affectionately touched her hand. Raising his head, he said, "Don't worry Princess, He Xia will swear right now that there will be one day where I'll make Princess become the noblest woman in the world and then personally crown the Princess as the Queen of the Four Countries."

Princess Yaotian's eyes suddenly brightened, "Does Husband really have such lofty ambitions?"

He Xia tossed his head back and laughed for a long time. "Life is too short, if I don't do something great, how could I feel worthy of my parents who raised me?"

Princess heard that his voice was brimming with confidence, sounding extremely heroic. Secretly delighted, she softened her voice. "Since Husband is so complacent, presumably already having a plan to unify the four countries."

He Xia stopped his laughter, thinking hard before replying, "The first thing to do, is definitely to forbid my life rival from returning to being the strength of Dong Lin's Royal House."

Princess Yaotian had been in charge of politics for a while, therefore she recognised the most important people of each country. She interrupted immediately, "Chu Beijie has already retired to the mountains, not interested in the government, but he'll definitely leave the mountains if Dong Lin is in trouble. How does Husband plan to break Chu Beijie's blood connection to the Royal House of Dong Lin?"

He Xia secretly admired this girl's wit, for knowing the situation of the four countries so well. He flashed her a look of approval, clutching onto her willow-like waist to help her up so that they could both admire the far away moon outside the window.

"There's only one scenario where Chu Beijie would never return to the Royal House of Dong Lin. Even if their Royal House is in danger, Chu Beijie would never dare interfere and will just sit back and watch."

Princess Yaotian frowned for a long time, then shook her head. "I have

absolutely no idea. In what scenario, would Chu Beijie leave his family?” Her beautiful, intelligent and wise eyes were trained on He Xia, searching for the answer.

A little hesitation surfaced on He Xia’s handsome face. He gazed at the moon, shaking a little. Then, as if remembering that Princess Yaotian’s question was still unanswered, he slowly breathed out, whispering, “That is, when Chu Beijie, of the Dong Lin Royal House, loses his most beloved woman.”

“Chu Beijie’s most beloved woman?”

“Her name is...” He Xia’s lips seemed to be as heavy as gold. They spat out the familiar name with great difficulty, “...Bai Pingting.”

Princess Yaotian was shocked, and she sucked her lip in response.

Pingting, Bai Pingting.

The real mastermind of the Jing-An Ducal Residence. He Xia’s most beloved maid.

Rumours said that Bai Pingting was the manipulator behind Dong Lin’s forced treaty to Gui Le for five years of peace.

Rumours said that Bai Pingting was the one who saved Bei Mo, and killed Dong Lin’s two young princes.

Rumours said that Bai Pingting was currently being imprisoned by a very furious Chu Beijie.

Just what kind of woman are you really?

Translation Notes

- Double (golden) phoenix: Symbolic of happiness to a couple.
- Watch out for your leg: Punishment for servants, when they make errors, is being whipped on the leg.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 28

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch28

To describe the kind of woman Bai Pingting is was something that even Chu Beijie couldn't do.

He sat up in bed, his eyes full of unrest as he turned to the figure lying beside him.

The morning sun managed only a trace of light to pierce the heavy clouds and fall softly on her spread-out black hair. He saw a hint of smile on her unsuspecting sleeping face.

A good dream?

Chu Beijie couldn't help it. He drew closer to her.

He knew he hadn't been nice to her.

For eight months, she has been imprisoned in the west chamber. Every night he violated her, gaining a lingering ecstasy each time, but he had yet to be nice to her once.

Why does she still have sweet dreams? Chu Beijie didn't understand.

He neared her, wanting to see the smile in her lips in more detail. The breath ejected from her nose sent strands of her soft hair fluttering.

Her thick eyelashes began to flutter. Chu Beijie pulled away and slipped out of the bed.

Pingting opened her eyes, seeing Chu Beijie's turned back. She sat up, whispering, "Up already, Duke?"

His back. It was always and only the back view.

Last night's affection was a passing cloud. When she woke, not even a trace was left.

The Chu Beijie she saw today was the same as that day he left without a word, his straight posture and unchanging heart of stone.

Eight months have passed. Now is the season of snow. Spring was still in a distant place.

"Miss, you're up?" Her personal maid, Hongqian, stepped into the room holding a brass basin full of hot water. She placed it down on the table and rubbed her hands while saying, "It's really cold today, and snow already started falling before dawn. It isn't heavy, but it's still dreadfully cold. You should wash soon, while the water's still hot."

She walked forward, helping Pingting off the bed. Catching a glimpse of Pingting's frown, she hurriedly asked, "What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

Pingting sat back on the bed. She closed her eyes to compose herself before opening them again. Shaking her head Pingting replied, "It's nothing. I simply rose too quickly hence a hamstring was pulled."

The water was warm. The mist whirled and lightly danced, enveloping the smoothly polished copper basin. Pingting slowly immersed her fingers into the water, appreciating the different temperatures.

Hongqian stared at the ten fingers, sighing softly. "What beautiful hands."

"Beautiful?" Pingting questioned.

"Beautiful."

Pingting pulled her hands out of the water and Hongqian wrapped them in a white cotton towel, gently patting dry.

Tender fingertips, beautifully shaped nails and thin, scallion-like fingers.

Pingting laughed. "What's the point about beauty? These two hands can no longer play the qin."

"Why?" Hongqian asked curiously.

Pingting didn't appear to be in the mood for talking. She turned away, idly

looking at the bitterness of winter outside her window.

Hongqian had already been serving Pingting for over a month and knew her temper. Knowing that she'd been speaking out of place, she didn't ask any further. She good-naturedly packed up the things, picking up the basin and preparing to exit the west chamber.

The maid walked out of the threshold. She was about to turn to close the door when she heard a voice.

The voice was like smoke and vulnerable to the wind. It left a hint of incense residual that lingered by the ear.

"I...don't have a qin."

The qin quickly came.

Not quite noon, a guqin had been placed on the desk.

It wasn't something fancy like the tail-burnt guqin or made of parasol-tree, but to find such a thing in such a desolate place within half a day was an achievement within itself.

Pingting reached out, touching that qin. She stroked it gently and lovingly as if it weren't a qin but a frightened kitten, needing much comfort.

Hongqian came in again.

"Miss, you can play qin now right?"

Pingting shook her head.

Hongqian continued, "Don't you have a qin now?"

It seemed as if pain or something else hooked the corners of Pingting's red lips into a laugh, but she still shook her head absentmindedly. "What's the point of having a qin? No one's listening, therefore why waste the effort?"

"I'll listen."

"You?" Pingting paused, turning around. She smiled. "Can you understand what you hear?"

Before Hongqian's frustration surfaced, Pingting began to laugh softly. "Oh well, I'll just assume you understand it then."

Hands were washed; incense was lit.

The hazy white smoke fluttering in midair brought an indescribable tenderness that gently floated at the tip of people's noses.

Pingting knelt and composed herself.

She plucked a string....

Following the soft sound, the notes danced away from the strings with invisible wings, stretching out with graceful posture and extending into the beyond.

"When there is trouble, there are heroes; when there are heroes, there are beautiful women; surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil..."

She opened her heart to the singing, plucking the strings with greater emotion.

Whether it be about heroes or beautiful women.

This phrase, she knew, was just silly people in a silly knot of emotion.

"If there are soldiers, there will be fame; if there is fame, there will be fraud; soldiers know fraud, soldiers know fraud..."

Despite her hands being both thin and white, her singing was as steady as a rock.

As she plucked the strings, it was as if she had returned to the dangerously shrouded cliffs of the Cloud Valley route where she was in Chu Beijie's arms, promising to never go against each other despite the abyss below their feet.

If soldiers knew fraud, then what about feeling?

Yangfeng was a thousand miles away. She sent three letters, each word carrying tears and sorrow. Each one was more anxious than the last.

Pingting restrained her emotion. She ripped each and every one of those letters sent from a thousand miles into shreds until they became flying paper butterflies that filled the skies.

It was the cause.

How to explain? What to explain?

She could not end the House of Jing-An bloodline.

Nor did she want to believe that Chu Beijie's love for her was nothing but a perfect scam.

If there were true feelings, how could one lose to fraud?

If there was deep love, then believe to the end. Love until the end. Regardless of the innumerable twists and turns, one's mind should never be changed.

"Swallows bring fortune, but too much fortune brings damage. A joy to look, a joy to look..."

Steadily and tactfully overturning the accusations was the most intelligent approach.

Praying for a test of heart? It's foolish to use love to resolve resentment.

Pingting stroked the qin, chuckling softly.

When women want love, they do everything they can.

She had always been smart, so being foolish this one time meant no harm.

The final note glided into the air, hovering in the ceiling beams as if reluctant to leave. Pingting raised her head and saw Hongqian's intoxicated face, two teardrops already forming on her eyelashes.

"Silly girl, what are you crying for?" Pingting couldn't help but laugh.

Hongqian raised a hand to wipe away her tears, saying unhappily, "It's all Miss' fault for playing such a miserable song yet I'm the one who's to blame."

Pingting wrinkled her little nose, revealing a childish expression. She spluttered, "Such a good song, yet in your ears, it becomes miserable?"

She took her hands off the qin and was about to tell Hongqian to pack it away, when Moran entered the room. "The Duke said that after Miss is finished playing, the qin must be returned. Whenever Miss wishes to play in the future, she is welcome to borrow it again."

Pingting's expressive eyes rotated before hesitantly nodding her head. "Sounds good." She had Moran pack up the qin and walked over to the side table where a cup of tea was waiting for her.

Hongqian hurriedly added, "Miss, please don't drink it; that tea is cold. I'll go

brew some hot tea now.” She moved forwards, ready to receive the piece of ceramic.

Pingting didn’t bother. “I feel hot from just finish playing qin, so cold tea is fine.” Not waiting for Hongqian to come to her side, she drank from the cup. In one gulp, not one drop was left. Moran had just picked up the qin and although he tried to stop her, it was already too late.

It was winter hence the tea was as cold as ice water. Ever since the chaos at the Jing-An Ducal Residence, Pingting had undergone all sorts of setbacks, resulting in weaker health. Suddenly chugging this huge mouthful of frozen tea down her throat made her chest stiffen and was momentarily unable to speak.

Hongqian, seeing her expression, urgently said, “See, the cold has gotten to you now.”

Hongqian hurriedly began to fetch hot water, but Pingting grabbed her, whispering, “It’s fine, just choked a little”. She raised her head to see Moran who was still holding the qin. “Why are you still standing? Go back soon. If you’re late, the Duke will be angry again.”

Moran bowed and stepped out of the room. He did not head towards the Duke’s office. Instead, Moran turned twice at the end of the corridor until he arrived in a room adjacent to Pingting’s where Chu Beijie was waiting. He was wrapped in a mink coat, his face ashen.

“Duke, I’ve got the qin back.”

Chu Beijie scanned that qin, frowning as he asked, “How is she?”

“She’s a bit pale.”

“Nonsense!” Chu Beijie’s face darkened even more. “If it’s to relieve boredom, playing something cheerful is fine but not these complex, mind-probingly classical pieces.” After saying this, he loudly harrumphed.

Moran only then understood that the “nonsense” was not aimed at himself but at Pingting. He sighed secretly in relief when he heard Chu Beijie instruct, “Find a doctor to take her pulse.”

“Yes.” Moran lowered his head as he obeyed.

Chu Beijie's eyebrows locked in a frown. "Who could stand such a large cup of ice cold tea? Tell Hongqian to serve her carefully and prevent this from happening again." Moran agreed, secretly peeking at Chu Beijie's expression which remained a raven black mess. The Duke's temper was always abrupt when it came to Bai Pingting, making it difficult to figuring out.

The qin's sound sprinkling life was for a brief moment and could no longer be heard.

Chu Beijie returned to his office in the afternoon. He wasn't always in the office. Most of the time he dwelled in the neighbouring room. Doing paperwork was a lie. How would he still have paperwork these days? The secluded little building used wood thinner than his ducal residence, and it was unable to cover any sound. If Pingting sung, even if she sang softly, her sound still floated from her room room to beyond the wall, intoxicating Chu Beijie.

Even though intoxicated, he was definitely never drunk.

If he had gone crazy drunk, he would not hesitate to bypass that wall and stroll into Pingting's room to hug the singing person tightly to his chest, cherishingly and lovingly.

But he hadn't.

He stood at the wall, listening to her carefree singing, her conversations with Hongqian about the wind, grass and flowers that had yet to blossom.

Eight months. The most painful and longest eight months of his life.

Long ago he promised her when spring came and the flowers blossomed, he would pick some to take to the temple.

When will spring come?

When night dawned, Chu Beijie returned to Pingting's room.

Regardless of the violation, the indifference remained immovable.

"Duke." Pingting looked beyond the window. There was not a star in the cold, lonely night sky. She lowered her voice, "Tomorrow, perhaps there'll be heavy snow?"

Chu Beijie held her, seemingly asleep.

She knew that he wasn't asleep.

He knew she knew of his pretense.

Apart from indifference, he had no idea how to punish the woman beside him nor how to punish himself.

"It's my birthday tomorrow." Pingting whispered into Chu Beijie's ears. "Will the Duke accompany me? It'll snow tomorrow so allow me to play qin for Duke while admiring the snow..."

Chu Beijie couldn't stand it any longer. He widened his arms and hugged Pingting tightly, receiving a yelp.

Don't say any more; don't speak any more. So what about your birthday? Pingting, I can only love you like this under the cover of darkness. When morning comes, my dearest Brother and the spirits of his dead children surface once more.

Chu Beijie parted early in the morning. Pingting stared at his back, biting her lip and staying silent.

The sky transitioned to light. The brief period of sun was replaced by gloom, dark clouds, causing a pressuringly bitter chill.

"Ah, it's going to snow?" Hongqian breathed a sigh.

Pingting was sitting by the window. She held out her hand. She turned her head, "Look." In the middle of her palm laid a single snowflake.

"It's snowing."

The snowflakes fell gently and quietly, but the winds picked up intensity, hurling the frozen droplets of water around. The sky was sullenly overcast as if sick of the sun and planned to chase it behind the clouds forever.

The sand in the hourglass slipped little by little, and Pingting silently counted.

Today was her birthday, and three hours have been wasted already.

She was born in the midst of snow at least what she imagined though in reality, it was the Duchess who was. The parents she had never met were perhaps the only people who knew the exact date of Bai Pingting's birth.

She remembered the day the Duchess brought her to the Ducal residence. She'd boasted, "With a wit as smart as snow, she must be a baby born in heavy snow." The Duchess then chose a snowy day to be the anniversary of her birth.

Pingting liked snow. Every year on her birthday, the Ducal Residence was vibrant with celebration. He Xia often invited a crowd of nobles to drink, Prince He Su included. The more the boys grew tipsy and drunk, the more urgent the encouragements were. "Pingting, play the qin! Hurry up and play qin! Pingting, play a piece please!"

Dongzhuo loved to prank the most and often already had the qin over brought and prepared. He'd pull her over and placed her hands at the strings as she doubled over, laughing. The crowd would always be noisy at first. As the qin sounded, everything quickly quietened down. Whether leaning or standing, they listened to the song while admiring the snow. As one song was finished, she'd hear a soft applause that was different from everyone else's. She'd happily turn around, yelling, "Yangfeng, don't you dare be lazy! I'm the birthday girl, so for every song, you have to play ten."

Pingting began to chuckle, then struggled to restrain her smile.

The heavy snow seemed to mock the metamorphosis of life.

The day's loneliness was something that no one needed to care about, but Chu Beijie had to.

He shouldn't disregard it.

She gazed at the hourglass once more, watching the time slipping grain by grain. The person she wanted to see did not come. She had endured all sorts of coldness in these eight months yet she had not seen a smile nor heard any warm words. Why was there nothing in return?

"Hongqian."

Hongqian stepped through a side door, asking, "What would you like, Miss?"

Pingting lowered her head, examining her slender fingers.

"Find the Duke." She articulated each word carefully, with a pause after each. "I want to borrow the qin."

The qin was quickly borrowed, and Moran personally carried and prepared it, saying, "If Miss would like to play qin to relieve her boredom, play something light. If it's complex or mind-probing, please don't play at all."

"Where's the Duke?"

"The Duke is..." Moran avoided her gaze, "is in his office doing paperwork."

"Is he busy today?"

Moran was silent for a long time before he replied with a single word. "Yes."

Pingting nodded her head. "I understand. As for the qin, I'll return it afterwards."

As Moran left, Hongqian tried to light the incense. Pingting interrupted her. "No need, I'll do it myself."

She personally broke the incense, lit it, and brought the water. She carefully dipped her hands, slowly patted them dry and sat at the qin.

Pingting positioned herself. With a small smile, she placed her scallion like fingers onto the qin, calmly tuning a few notes. She combined a vibrato and a trill, creating a startling agitation as if an armoured cavalry units rushed from within. The entire room instantly quieted down.

Pingting was on a verge of laughter yet her face was solemn, her fingers anxious. Within a moment, raging battle cries, neighing horses, and thundering drums engulfed the surroundings shook the skies. The listening Hongqian's face was pale as she tightly clutched to the cloth covering her chest, completely devoid of energy.

Chu Beijie was not to blame; it was her own fault.

It was she who blocked Chu Beijie's movement and it was she who said, "That promise still stands. Please let Pingting follow Duke to the ends of the earth, my honour is decided by Duke and my death decided by Duke."

She had held out her hand, which Chu Beijie took.

From thereon, her honour, life and death, was not hers but his.

She thought she'd endured enough.

Since last spring, all she received was a back view with no lingering feelings. She had endured for eight months and finally given up on this day, a day she dearly hoped to have some affection. She would endure anything for a phrase, an expression, or even for a single trace of the person she loved.

It was a pity, but there was nothing at all.

The qin sound gradually calmed as if the sounds of war had come to an end and the few surviving bloodstained horses stood on the battlefield while a fire lightly burned a fallen flag. It was utterly desolate.

Thick sweat oozed out of Pingting's forehead, yet she refused to give up. She struggled to finish the remaining notes. Her upper body swayed slightly before crumpling to gravity.

Hongqian was too shocked by the qin sound and had not yet recovered. A figure rushed into the room, catching hold of Pingting with one hand and the placing the other on top of the qin to cease its sound.

Pingting could only feel someone supporting her and felt her heart throb with excitement as she turned. The light in her eyes suddenly dimmed as she pursed her lips. "Let go." She struggled to get up. A pang of dizziness instantly washing over yet she refused to make any sound.

Moran hurriedly let go, reasonably saying, "The Duke is currently working outside this room. Miss' qin sound...is too loud."

Pingting's expression was tired. She laughed bitterly. "I am so sorry about that."

Moran then added, "The Duke also reminds that Miss is borrowing this qin. Since Miss has already played a few pieces, it's time to take it back."

"Moran, I want to see the Duke."

Moran hesitated for a moment as if listening to the surroundings. He waited for a while before gritting his teeth. "The Duke is very busy. He will come in the evening as usual."

"I have something important that I must tell him." Pingting stressed every word. "I must clarify all of the misunderstandings he currently has."

Moran hesitated for a while again, but there was no sound to be heard. This time, even he seemed a little disappointed himself, and sighed as he repeated, “The Duke, he...he will come in the evening as usual.”

Pingting’s eyes flicked over to Moran who seemed to be afraid of her gaze. He turned away. Pingting lowered her voice. “You can take it back. Thank the Duke for me.” She could no longer take the weight of her body and gripped the chair for support as she slowly sat down.

Moran picked up the qin and spun out of the room.

Chu Beijie was not in his office. He was standing in the middle of the raging snowstorm. His body stood, determined and fixed like iron as if completely unaware of the snow around him.

“Duke, I have retrieved the qin.” Moran passed the qin to him.

A few snowflakes had gotten onto the qin. In Chu Beijie’s eyes, it brought an unexpected prickling sensation.

He was regretting it. He shouldn’t have given her a qin and shouldn’t have listened to the qin’s sound. Pingting’s last piece fluttered in his heart like an unwavering ghost yet stabbed at his heart like a knife, slicing his flesh into the finest pieces while death lingered. When he heard that final, elegiac piece, he had felt an overpowering devastation, scaring him into a cold sweat.

Without his few remaining threads of reason, he wouldn’t have asked Moran to go in. He would have rushed inside himself. He’d pick her up and would severely warn her to never, ever, play such a piece again.

She had enough of life.

She didn’t care about life or death. She wanted, with war-like determination, to generously cut her throat and die a tragic death that belonged to anyone but herself.

He deeply hated her but could not stand the idea of losing her.

Moran couldn’t help but ask, “Duke, are you really not going to see Miss Bai? Miss Bai said...”

Chu Beijie’s gaze was like daggers and tossed the qin at his face, which he

caught with a shudder.

Moran hurriedly lowered his head, "I, your servant, deserve death."

A strong gust of wind blew past his ear. He felt something colder than the snow.

It was a while before he heard Chu Beijie's deep voice.

"You can go."

Chu Beijie returned to his office and did not come out again, not even for lunch. Moran was jumpy all day. He uncomfortably waited for two hours in the side room until Hongqian entered with a food container. She asked worriedly, "What are we to do? Miss refuses to eat."

She opened the food container, taking each dish out one by one two different meat dishes, two different vegetable dishes, a dish of pickled radish, and snowy white rice. None were touched.

"I spent ages begging her, but she seemed to be counting the rice grains or something. After picking out a few, she put her chopsticks down and said she was full. If this continues, she'll end up getting sick. The Duke would peel the skin off all of us servants."

"Peel whose skin?" A looming shadow appeared at the doorway to the office.

This startled Hongqian. She spun around to look but quickly lowered her head. "Duke..."

Chu Beijie's gaze fell on the laid out dishes of the food container. "Is it her?"

"Yes," replied Moran.

Hongqian carefully, concisely reported, "Miss Pingting only drank half of bowl of porridge this morning. She barely touched her lunch. I thought this wasn't too good, so I came to tell General Chu."

Chu Beijie's heavy gaze shot towards her. "Has she been like this recently?"

"Her appetite hasn't been good since winter. She is eating less and less these days and it seemed a little better last night. She ate some side dishes and a whole bowl of rice."

Moran seemed to remember something, and lowered his voice as he whispered to Chu Moran, "Last night, Duke told me to give the dishes sent from the Ducal Residence to Miss Bai. Perhaps..."

Chu Beijie listened, before instructing Hongqian. "There's still some of those dishes left. Take them to her."

Hongqian was originally chosen to serve Pingting for her clever and well-behaved nature. Seeing Chu Beijie unangered, the maid plucked up her courage. Her voice, involuntarily having a little too much fear, softly said, "Reporting to the Duke, I thought that perhaps Miss Bai liked those side dishes, so I had them prepared for today. However, it wasn't helpful at all. She didn't touch them yet she claimed she was full."

Chu Beijie coldly gazed at the cold dishes. "Understood, you may go."

After sending back Hongqian, he turned to Moran. He faintly asked, "What do you think?"

"Yes?" Moran was perplexed by the question. After studying Chu Beijie's expression, he knew that he couldn't afford to say the wrong thing, but could only answer in such a way.

Chu Beijie seemed to be mumbling to himself however, "She can't take it any more, right?"

"Duke..."

Before Moran could finish his words, Chu Beijie suddenly interrupted. "Don't say anymore!" He turned away, his hands behind his back, shoulders constantly trembling. It could have been because of anger or of excitement. Several moments later, he finally calmed down. His voice was cold. "Let's go to see her."

The two neared Pingting's room and happened to hear sound coming from the inside.

"Miss Bai, the Duke commanded me. I cannot defy his orders. Whether your body is unwell or not, please just let me take your pulse so that I can explain myself."

"I'll go see the Duke. Just say I'm not sick."

Chu Beijie's thick eyebrows suddenly creased. He pushed open the door and marched into the room. His body was huge. He stood by the window, blocking most of the sunlight to enter room and casting a massive shadow onto the floor.

The entire room fell quiet.

Pingting was wearing a little jacket. She sat on the bed covered in green velvet blankets, suggesting that she had just gotten up from an afternoon nap when the doctor had come. Her silky black hair had yet to be combed and was scattered on one side of her body. Her white face and black eyes were completely devoid of expression. She hadn't expected that Chu Beijie would suddenly rush in. She only felt a huge gush of wind darting inside and the room dropping several degrees. She jerked her head upwards to meet Chu Beijie's blazing eyes. Their hearts suddenly thumped as their gazes touched as if stuck together, unable to move.

Chu Beijie's cold fury rose again but wavered under her gaze. Trying to regain his composure, he waved the others away, "You can all leave."

Hongqian, Moran, and the doctor immediately cleared the way. Only two people locked in gaze remained in the entire room.

Chu Beijie stared condescendingly at Pingting for a long time. He looked at her pale face and fragile, uncomfortable body, remembering her crisply healthy body back then. He was enraged she refused to see the doctor despite her current state. But the angrier he was, the calmer his tone. He asked, "You're not such a disgraceful person, so why are you doing such a ridiculous thing for?"

It would have been better if he hadn't asked. Pingting lowered her eyelids and began to chuckle softly. She raised her energetic eyes, smiling at Chu Beijie. "The Duke is here. Pingting's goal is finally fulfilled."

Even though she was not a beauty of the upper ranks, her clever eyes were seductive enough. Coupled with her sweet smile that revealed two fine dimples, Chu Beijie's heart was pierced. Chu Beijie stepped forward until his line of sight was filled with her, the woman in her bed.

His war-like expression cold and unfeeling resurfaced again. Chu Beijie's numbing coldness enveloped Pingting's body.

“Even now that you are before me, why do you still play these pointless tricks?”

Pingting raised her head to look at Chu Beijie. She lowered her voice, “Duke is wrong. How is this a pointless trick?”

Having the Duke by Pingting’s side for this brief moment, in Pingting’s eyes, was a happiness that she would not swap for even all of the world’s riches.

This sentence was like a master move, an attack that caught Chu Beijie off guard. He had planned to leave, but couldn’t bear it right now. With a tug from Pingting’s small hand, he couldn’t help but sit down by the bed.

Pingting’s warm body leaned towards him, her hands tightly wound around his neck. Chu Beijie hated her for poisoning his nephews with her schemes and sworn never to show any affection. That moment, however, he couldn’t bear pushing away so he held her. “You wanted to see me to tell me what?”

“It’s too late.”

“Too late?”

Pingting hugged Chu Beijie tightly, lowering her voice. “I was going to say it, but Duke has missed that chance. Why would Pingting beg a third time to get someone to listen to their innocence? From my birth to my death, I will no longer tell Duke the truth. If you wish to wrongly accuse me, then go ahead and do so.”

Chu Beijie suddenly stood up, throwing her onto the bed, furious. “You’re not repenting and still playing these tricks?”

He turned and stormed away.

“Please wait, Duke!” Pingting suddenly yelped out, forcing Chu Beijie to pause.

“Pingting has already thought this through.” Pingting’s voice remained soft but gradually turned cold. “Since eight months of endurance is unable to make Duke fall in love with Pingting once more, there is no reason for Pingting to forcibly stay.”

Chu Beijie promptly turned around, his voice icier. “Don’t you dare run away.”

“No,” Pingting laughed shallowly, “I’m committing suicide.”

Chu Beijie laughed scornfully. “To use the death threat is the most flawed tactic ever.”

Pingting paid no attention to his scorn and continued, “Unless the Duke stays with me at all times, I will not continue to live peacefully.”

Chu Beijie fiercely replied, “In my hands, dying is not such an easy task.”

Her determination met with Chu Beijie’s blazing eyes, unwavering. Slightly ashamed, she lowered her voice, “A person who wishes wholeheartedly to commit suicide cannot be stopped by anyone.”

Chu Beijie suddenly opened the curtains, allowing the snowflakes to spiral inside.

“Moran!”

“Here!” Moran hurriedly rushed forward.

“Make sure,” he pointed at the thin figure in the room, “you take good care of her. If there is the slightest hint of an accident, report it to me at once!”

Translation Notes:

- “As smart as snow”: This is a very common metaphor in Chinese. (I don’t know why or how this metaphor came to be, so I really just left it for humour here.)
- “Tail-burnt guqin”: One of the four greatest guqin of China, with the most famous “history”.
- “Threshold”: The strip of wood/stone at the bottom of a doorway. A raised threshold is/was popular in Chinese architecture and the taller it is, the more prestigious the family is.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 29

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch29

Moran was unable to sleep that night. Chu Beijie's final expression as he left for the night shook his nerves, and he didn't dare to look at Pingting.

Who knew what words had darted out of her blood-red lips to have caused the Duke to lose his composure?

The overnight howling wind and falling snow did not stop for even the briefest moment.

Moran stood at one side and saw Hongqian crying as she begged, "Please Miss, don't cause trouble. The Duke is already angry."

Pingting lay propped on a couch, her eyes conveying her certainty. Her eyes flickered past Hongqian and jokingly said, "So it was for the Duke."

The sides of Hongqian's eyes were red as she hurriedly shook her head. "No, it's not that...it's not for the Duke; it's for Miss. You shouldn't damage your health like this. At least eat a little. If you get sick on such a cold day, what will I do?"

Pingting measured her for a moment and couldn't help but soften her heart. "Sit here." Pingting pulled the maid to sit and helped her smooth out the stray strands undone from her vigorous shaking. Pingting chuckled, "Silly girl, you don't need to worry."

"Dear god, how could I not be worried?" Thanks to Pingting's soft persuasion, Hongqian's tears ended up falling instead. "The Duke said that if anything happens to Miss, your servant would be punished according to the army's ways." She wiped away her tears, "The Duke has never gone back on his words."

She shuddered at the thought of Chu Beijie's angry chilling gaze.

"The ways of the army are harsh, I can't help you either." Pingting was still acting leisurely, slowly leaning backwards.

At this state, Hongqian knew there wasn't the slightest change of heart and hurriedly stood back up. She shook her sleeve, saying, "Miss, of course you can help me. If Miss eats some food, then you've done me a huge favour."

Pingting seemed far away, out of earshot, thinking about something unknown. She appeared dazed out. Her gaze paused slightly on Hongqian before tightly closing her eyes, seemingly intending to sleep.

Hongqian however refused to give up. She begged. "Miss, you have a great heart. Miss, you couldn't let me die right?"

"Your life or death is in the Duke's hands," Pingting replied vaguely. "My life and death is also in the Duke's hands. Don't beg me, go beg the Duke." She turned to face the wall, refusing to say any more.

Moran observed coldly for the entire night. The second morning, he hurriedly arrived at Chu Beijie's bedroom. Chu Beijie's attendants apologised, "The Duke went to practice swordsmanship at dawn." Moran then rushed to the small courtyard where Chu Beijie practiced. When he reached the door, all he could hear was a sonorous voice overpowering the roar of wind and snow, followed by rattling sounds of clashing swords. Moran, surprised, quickened his approach to the courtyard.

Chu Beijie was sparring with his men, the blunt sword in his hands cleanly slicing horizontally and vertically; his tenacity was not easily stopped. It seemed that with every clash, at least one man would always fall out of the fight, but all his men were all battle-hardened, well-seasoned warriors. It wasn't for long before they retrieved their weapons to attack once more, despite still having difficult time to breathe. To a person unfamiliar with them, the fight between these two parties appeared to be a question of life and death.

When Moran had just placed one foot into the courtyard, his vision blurred as a shadow rushed towards him. His reaction was swift. Moran raised his hands, grabbed, and pinned Luoshang by the face against the courtyard wall. He whispered, "How's that?"

“You’re finally here.” Luoshang was also one of Chu Beijie’s personal guards. He sighed in relief the moment he saw Moran. “Calm the Duke down, he’s crazy today. We’ve been sparring in the snow for almost half an hour. There’s no sign of stopping. Us brothers will probably have to rest in bed for eight to ten days now.” Despite it all, Luoshang stooped down to pick up his sword and roared before rushing back into the spar. Chu Beijie countered his blow. The two struggled, locked by their swords.

Clang! The clash of swords rang.

Luoshang’s two shoulders were almost completely numb. His blunt sword fell to the ground with a single thud. Chu Beijie’s face was expressionless as he spat out, “Haven’t worked hard enough.” His left foot extended silently. Without warning, he kicked Luoshang near his waist, causing him to roll outside the fight.

“Duke, I have something to report.” Moran stood apart from the fight, lowering his voice.

The Duke must have been waiting for Moran. He took a step back, sheathed his weapon, looked around and waved at the others. “That’s enough for today, you can all go.”

The already punished guards could barely straighten their backs. Like hunchbacks, they quickly answered ‘yes’ and helped each other up. None forgot to give Moran a look of gratitude as they left.

“What would you like to report?” Chu Beijie passed off his sword and took the warm towel from a maid. Despite the freezing wind and heavy snow, he was only wearing a single layer and was sweating profusely.

“Hongqian begged for an entire night but Miss Pingting refused to even touch a drop of water. I think...”

Bang!

Chu Beijie’s hand slammed onto the wooden table. He sharply turned towards Moran, voice cold. “You can’t even properly take care of just a woman? And you have to report to me this early in the morning? Go, I don’t even want to hear that name.”

Even when facing millions of troops, Chu Beijie had never lost his composure like

now. Moran kept quiet, not daring to say a word. It took a few moment before he replied, "Yes." He backed out of the small courtyard, hesitating for a while. He then raised his head to look at Chu Beijie's back. There was no trace of his mind changing. He sighed a few times before turning around to leave.

The situation grew worse.

After the second day, no matter how Hongqian cried or begged, Pingting would no longer say a word.

She didn't just refuse food but also tea and other essential items. Whatever that was sent into her room warm, was left cold and untouched.

Hongqian asked Moran in a corner outside the room, "What to do? It's already been two days. If this goes on any longer, even if a person of steel cannot last. Can General Chu think of any other ways?"

Moran's well-chiselled features revealed a bitter smile. "What to do? Perhaps counter her with the military's ways? At her state of health, force-feeding her will only make things worse."

The two stood for a while in distress. Since their consultation resulted in no viable alternative, they had to turn back into the house.

Pingting was in the room, a scroll in her hand that she was leisurely reading. She didn't want Hongqian to help wash her hair and managed to put up a loose cloud bun by herself. Her silky black hair was secured with a hairpin. A few side strands softly fell on her shoulders, highlighting the unspeakable elegance from her face caused by her refusal to eat. Seeing the two people enter the room, she raised her head and smiled lightly as acknowledgement before lowering her head to resume her reading.

Moran hadn't expected her threat to be deliberate. If it was only a little unusual dramatic pastime, everything would've been fine. Coming today, he realised that the more comfortable Pingting appeared, the more agitated he was. Measuring his options, he told Hongqian, "Take care of her properly; I'll be right back."

He turned to go out of the room, instructing the guards outside the door to carefully watch over her. Grinding his teeth, he headed for Chu Beijie's office.

Halfway, he collided with a person who laughed while asking, “General Chu sure is walking in a hurry. Where are you heading?”

Moran raised his head, and saw a familiar face he hadn’t seen for a long time pop into his view. “Zuiju? Why are you here? With all this heavy snow, the genius Doctor Huo actually let you come here?”

“I setted out early in the morning and arrived at noon. Didn’t dare pause on the way.” Zuiju wore a maid’s clothing and raised her head to look at the sky. “What ghastly weather. It just stopped snowing for a while just now. If it hadn’t been the Duke’s handwritten letter about an urgent request without delay, Teacher would have never let me out. Sigh, this year’s snow isn’t stopping and Teacher’s foot has begun to hurt again.”

“You’re...”

“The gossip can wait. I heard that you’re responsible for taking care of that infamous Miss Bai. Hurry up and tell me where she is.”

Zuiju studied under Dong Lin’s genius doctor, Huo Yunan, and learned about seventy or eighty percent of her teacher’s skills. Of course Moran understood why Chu Beijie would urgently request her and turned, saying, “Let’s talk on the way.” He led the way to Pingting’s residence, lowering his voice, “Hasn’t had food for two days and refuses to touch water too. Her body was weak to begin with, and when nighttime arrives, she doesn’t stop coughing!”

“Shh.” Zuiju waved her hand. They had arrived outside the room and peeked inside. As they turned, their eyebrows furrowed.

“It’s her?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Not good.”

Outside the building, the sounds of footsteps crunching in the snow were heard. The kitchen’s matron was carrying a food container into the atrium.

Hongqian bustled out of the side room, rubbing her hands nervously. “The food’s here?” As she received the container, she asked, “The Duke asked for a few Gui Le dishes too, have they been made?”

“Yes. Geez, for these few tiny dishes, the entire kitchen was turned upside down. How could it be easy to prepare Gui Le dishes in such a short time in this kind of place?” The matron raised her head and looked further into the room, whispering, “How is it now?”

The mention of this made Hongqian worry again. “How is it now? I’m worried to death, but she’s super relaxed. Let me tell you, according to the Duke, if something happens to her....” She pointed towards the main room inside, “not just me, but the entire kitchen’s lives are at stake.”

The matron paled.

“Leave this food container to me.” Behind the two people, an unfamiliar face suddenly popped out.

Hongqian was startled, clutched to her chest and jumped back. She hadn’t opened her mouth yet when Zuiju had taken the heavy food container off her. “The Duke has ordered that, from now on, I will look after Miss Bai. Hongqian is to remain here, to help me familiarise how serving works here. You can just call me Zuiju.”

Although Hongqian was shocked, but was happy to have someone replace the pressure of failure. She lowered her head, saying, “Yes.”

“The kitchen still has work to do, so I’ll get going. The food container does not have to be returned to the kitchen, as I’ll come to get it myself. Just put it on the table in the side room.” The matron hurriedly excused herself, then stepped into the thick snow, going back the way she came.

Moran walked towards them. “Take them to her, or the dishes will get cold.”

Zuiju nodded her head and headed for the main room. She pushed open the door with one hand, the other holding the food container. When she turned, she saw that Hongqian had followed her. She whispered, “You don’t have to come in, I’ll deal with her myself.”

Hongqian knew Pingting’s stubbornness, her immense ability to hold her opinion regardless of how much one cried or begged. But seeing Zuiju’s utter confidence, she wasn’t sure what to say. She gave her a look, nodded and went into the side room.

Zuiju lifted the curtain and stood at the door, not making any other steps. She just quietly observed Pingting reading on the couch.

It was a while before she walked towards the table and opened the food container. One by one Zuiji took out the dishes, still steaming hot.

Two meat dishes, two vegetable dishes, steamed chicken soup with cloud ears, a bowl of well-boiled rice porridge and four other Gui Le side dishes.

Ten things in total, completely covered in colour, flavour and taste. Each was mouthwatering.

Zuiju spread out the dishes, stood by the raised platform and carefully sat down. “Your servant, Zuiju, due to the Duke’s order, has specifically come to serve Miss Bai.”

Pingting continued to have her head lowered, reading. Her slightly drooping neck, delicate white skin, was undescribably touching.

“I know persuasive words have all been used by Hongqian already, and even if the food on the table is limited delicacy of the mountains or seas, Miss feels no desire to eat.” Zuiju slyly smiled, saying, “Miss’ desire is to simply have the Duke by Miss’ side. Due to the Duke’s temper, surely only an extreme measure of the last resort can soften it? To me, if it really becomes the last resort, even if the Duke agrees to come, Miss can no longer hold up either. This ‘I test you, you test me’ will be a waste of your life and cause grief to the Duke forever. Miss is a wise person, so why continue such a foolish act?”

Pingting’s gaze finally lifted off the book and swept towards Zuiju.

Zuiju saw her movement and went a little closer, intentionally lowering her voice. “Miss’ love for the Duke is very deep and can’t bear to leave the Duke alone right? You have to look after your body so that you can gain the Duke’s love in the future. I have a bottle of special medicine, a family secret recipe. Taking one can replace the meals for the day. As for the dishes on the table, Miss does not have to worry about them. Just return them the way you used to. Like this, in less than two days, the Duke will definitely be distressed and will naturally come to see Miss.”

She took out a small bottle from her arms and shook it at Pingting. “This act

will not be detected by anyone, human, ghost or god. It is perfect to test the Duke's thoughts towards Miss and does not damage your body. What does Miss think?"

Moran had hid himself behind the door. His hearing was above most people and heard about seventy-five percent of Zuiju's words, which he thought were very clever.

To attack an opponent, one must attack the heart. This bottle of medicine was the perfect bait, making the future easier to deal with.

Pingting's gaze remained soft throughout and as clear as dew. She stared at Zuiju for a long time before suddenly opening her mouth to speak, "Can you smell the scent of snow?" Due to the lack of food Pingting's voice was very hoarse but still possessed an exciting charm that others lacked.

Zuiju was stunned, unsure of how to reply.

Pingting slowly turned away, her gaze resting towards the snowing sky where the sun tried to outrun the white face of the clouds.

She stretched her delicate eyebrows, carelessly slurring her words. "Only those who have pure hearts are able to smell the scent of snow. If you can't resolve the feeling of sadness and continuously panic, then what's the difference between life and death? I have already found the way to solve the problem of death so go tell the Duke that Pingting has never felt more relaxed than now."

Zuiju remained dazed for a long time before putting the bottle back into her sleeves. She stood up, preparing to leave. Out the door, she looked up to see a surprised and frustrated Moran. She pursed her lips, "There's nothing I can do but convince the Duke to come personally."

Moran sighed helplessly. "Easier said than done, the Duke is even harder to convince than she is. I can only hope that he changes his mind in fear. How could you or I possibly bear his punishments?"

Relationships between men and women were truly scary, making such a wise person like the Duke fall into the pits of traps, putting their survival at great risk. This fatal attraction between two clever people resulted in too many setbacks.

Zuiju tried again. "If one place doesn't work, then try the other place. Let me

try.” Leaving Moran, she headed towards his office by herself.

Chu Beijie was in his office. He held a teacup in his hand, but he didn’t even drink a sip until the tea became cold.

Then suddenly, he heard someone outside. “Zuiju would like to see Duke.”

Chu Beijie abruptly stood up from his seat, before realising his actions were too impulsive. He returned to sitting down. He placed the cup back onto the table. “Come in.”

Zuiju walked into the office and bowed at Chu Beijie. “Duke, Zuiju has seen Miss Bai.”

“Still refusing to eat?”

“Yes.”

“How’s her body?”

“Judging by her face, not very well.”

Chu Beijie replied “Hm.” He asked using a deeper voice, “You haven’t gotten her pulse?”

“No.”

“Given her any medicine?”

“No.”

“Applied acupuncture yet?”

“No.”

Chu Beijie laughed coldly. “Your Teacher bragged about your cleverness, how you are able to determine a patient’s intentions so even psychiatric conditions are solved. Since you are not taking her pulse, giving medicine or applying acupuncture, I suppose you must have another way to help her?”

“Yes,” Zuiju replied respectfully, “Zuiju does have a way to help her.”

“Oh?” A dim light of interest flickered in Chu Beijie’s eyes. “Say, how do you plan to help her?”

Zuiju carefully thought this through for a while and then rapidly spat out, “If

the Duke firmly refuses to see Miss Bai, then Zuiju's best plan to help Miss Bai is to prepare poison for her, so she can part from this world without pain." She paused and sighed. "No one can convince Miss Bai. From just one phrase, her words are not a threat or blackmail but something she feels comfortable about. She is waiting for Duke's decision without resentment. A doctor's heart is like a parent's, so knowing that she's a hopeless case, giving her poison is the happiest choice."

Chu Beijie's breathing stopped, his clenched fists loosened, then tightened again. He quietly asked, "What phrase?"

"She asked Zuiju if she could smell the scent of snow." Zuiju's expression was one of remembrance, "She said, only those who have pure hearts are able to smell the scent of snow."

Chu Beijie suddenly stood up as if suddenly struck by lightning. For a long time, he appeared to be deep in thought. "Did she really say that?" he asked.

"Duke, you have to harden your heart and just let her go."

The sentence was barely finished when Chu Beijie had already pushed open the heavy door curtain.

The chilling bitter wind gushed into the room, causing the scrolls of art to flap noisily against the wall.

Seeing Chu Beijie's parting back view, Zuiju hid her smile. "See Teacher, I was right wasn't I? The Duke is the one who's sick."

Stepping into the room, Chu Beijie seemed to be unable to move under Pingting's gaze.

He had guessed many times, but he had never expected that Pingting would be waiting for him like this.

She was still lying on the couch, her upper body leaning against a cushion, her head softly placed on top of a pillow, revealing only half of her soft face to the outside.

A purple blanket covered her from the waist down, appearing to be increasingly fragile. A half-open scroll lay in her hand.

Everything was as still and beautiful as a masterpiece.

Her infinitely deep black eyes were gone, as she had closed her eyes. Her black yet long lashes perfectly rested on the tip of her lower eyelid.

Something resembling a serene smile escaped from her dry, cracked lips.

At that moment, Chu Beijie only had one thought in mind.

Pingting is gone.

She was no longer, and left with a smile.

His world split into countless pieces as if a beast had bared its fangs and swallowed the four seasons in whole.

Everything had ceased to exist whether it was the flowers of spring, the autumn moon, the summer cicadas or the winter snow. Colour was lost.

She was as faint as her chords and gradually dissipated.

Had already dissipated.

Chu Beijie was dazed like a clay statue, crumbling. Moran took a step forward to support Chu Beijie with a hand but was pushed away.

Hongqian happened to come into the room and saw Chu Beijie's figure. Her voice was a mixture of shock and happiness as she cried, "Miss, Miss Bai! The Duke is here to see you." She threw herself at Pingting, whispering, "Don't sleep any more, Miss, the Duke is here!"

She shook her a few times.

Chu Beijie watched the eyeballs under her skin moving a little before her eyelids slowly, silently opened little by little.

Those eyelids hid all of his world's colours. As they slowly opened, light came out of them. The wider her eyes, the more the hidden colours scattered out. The colour returned to the blankets, the couch, the pillow, the scroll in her hand and the blush on Hongqian's face that were once all white-gray.

It was as if a bright light was circled around Pingting, causing others to have trouble looking at her.

Chu Beijie finally found his four limbs, yet his mind was blank and his eyes were

filled with the light. Thankfully his feet had a mind of their own and managed to seat him down at a table. He picked up a bowl of soup and sat next to the platform.

He did not know when, but Moran and Hongqian had already excused themselves.

Chu Beijie held the soup. Pingting blinked.

The two people did not hide the fact they were staring at each other.

“Duke...”

“Must you die?”

“Does Duke want Pingting to live?”

Chu Beijie pursed his thin lips, silently gazing at the soup in his hands.

“Don’t worry. If Duke doesn’t want to talk, then Pingting won’t force you.” Pingting struggled, wanting to sit up. “I’ll drink it myself.”

“No.” Without thinking, his hand had already pressed onto her thin shoulders, making her body involuntarily lie back down again. “I’ll do it,” he whispered these three words, picking up the spoon.

He carefully filled a spoonful and brought it to his own mouth, lightly blowing on it. Only then did he realise that the soup was not hot enough and he frowned as he turned to get someone to change it.

“It’s fine,” said the soft voice.

Chu Beijie turned back.

Her beautiful lips had a few cracks due to lack of water. This was like a cut to his heart.

“No, drink it warm for once.” He loudly spoke, “Send someone to the kitchen immediately and tell them to bring a new table of food.”

His tone left no doubts. The people outside replied ‘yes’ and hurriedly ran to pass on his order.

He put down the cold soup in his hands, his gaze unable to leave Pingting’s pale lips. His vigorous fingers went up to gently stroke the fine cracks.

“It’s cracked...” Chu Beijie murmured. He couldn’t help but put his hot tongue on her lips, moisturizing her dried wounds.

Pingting’s silent treatment was finally broken down. “Ah,” she cried in a low voice and turned away, surprised and ashamed, but Chu Beijie’s big, gentle yet firm hand pulled her back.

“Was life and death mine, including your honour?” He asked in a low voice.

The overbearing kiss was ferocious as an attack of the Dong Lin warriors he led, a truly firm one.

She was like fragile flowers on branches, unable to block the power of the wind.

Bai Pingting held her breath.

She helplessly placed and curled up her slender fingers on Chu Beijie’s clothing. Whether it was to push him away or to grasp onto him, no one knew.

The snow outside appeared to lessen and Pingting’s face grew dizzying hot.

She tried to open her eyes tighter and look at the light in Chu Beijie’s eyes a little better.

“Duke, the hot soup is here...”

Not only did hot soup come, but four heavy layers of food containers, each steaming hot.

Hongqian and Zuiju were peeping at their spring, two red clouds floating near their ears. They bit their lower lips as they busily arranged with much effort.

The kitchen was amazing. They had prepared so much in such a short notice.

Two meat and two vegetable dishes were placed in the middle of the table with all sorts of coloured dishes around them, like starry friends accompanying the bright moon. From red to orange to yellow to purple, all were brightly coloured.

Green onion flowers floated in the lotus and ham soup. In the freezing season of winter, it must have taken a while to find them.

Zuiju brought the soup bowl over and carefully lowered her head to blow a

spoonful, which she then brought before Pingting.

“Miss Bai, the Duke is here already so please eat.”

“Just eat.”

Pingting refused to open her mouth, not making a sound.

Despite the fragrant soup before her, she seemed to be completely untempted.

After the forced kiss and Chu Beijie’s display of affection, he released the beauty in his arms, frowning. “What other conditions do you need?”

Pingting sucked her lip, a coldness hidden in her eyes as she undemandingly looked at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie sat at the platform, feeling all of his organs burning under her gaze. More complex than complex, not in pain nor tired, yet overwhelmingly difficult to read.

How could he possibly let her have her own way? Chu Beijie widened his eyes, not saying a word, as he stared back at her.

His gaze sharpened.

The stronger his was, the weaker hers was. If one became more charming, the other became more delicate, revealing her intense stubbornness.

The more stubborn, the more adorable.

Chu Beijie’s heart softened. He couldn’t help but sigh.

In a battle of the two, it was not the stronger who would win.

No wonder it was often the gentle person who became a true hero.

“Open your mouth.” Chu Beijie was helpless, and took the bowl from Zuiju’s hands.

The moment his words rang out, smiling joy immediately surfaced from Pingting’s sad, pale face. Her pouty lips formed a smile of unlimited potential. Chu Beijie shook at the appearance of her smile. His hand that held so many swords could not stable itself, spilling drops of the hot soup onto the purple blanket.

“Drink it properly.” Chu Beijie lowered his voice, composing himself.

Laughter was hidden in the bottom of Pingting’s eyes. She obediently opened her mouth and swallowed a mouthful of the hot soup. The lotus was sweet; the ham was mellow.

“Blow it again,” she suddenly said.

“Eh?”

“Blow it again.” Her smile deepened, her dimples showing shyly. “It’s hot.”

The Chu Beijie who had commanded millions of soldiers had never guessed that he’d feel so powerless on this one day. He was literally sucking up to this insatiable woman. Each word put him completely to shame.

He stiffly bent down, blew until the soup was cold before clumsily bringing it to her lips.

Pingting obediently opened her mouth once again and drank the delicious lotus and ham soup. Leaning on the pillow, she chuckled, “This is the best soup I’ve ever had, doesn’t Duke agree?”

Chu Beijie replied bitterly to this, “How would I know?”

Pingting saw his stoic expression but couldn’t suppress her laugh. Seeing Chu Beijie with just a passing trace of exasperation, her scallion-like, white fingers of jade took the spoon off him. She filled it before carefully bringing it to his lips.

Chu Beijie looked at her.

Her eyes were completely clear, much like the fresh springs of hills, without a trace of impurity. This looked too sore and too sour in his eyes. He refused to open his mouth. With just this spoon, she had disappointed the skies, disappointed the most disappointing.

How despicable, how annoying!

He bit his lip tightly, but suddenly seemed to change his mind. His expression changed to one made at a decisive moment in a battle. He abruptly opened his mouth wide and stuffed the whole spoonful of soup into his mouth. His upper body uncontrollably pitched forward, one hand clutching firmly onto the soup bowl and other resting on Pingting’s shoulder, forcing his lips to hers.

What came over, other than soup, were also Chubeijie's strength, intelligence, dominance and arrogance.

How could he so willingly agree to her conditions?

Pingting's eyelashes trembled. She closed her eyes, her thin delicate arms wrapping around Chubeijie's generously wide shoulders. Through gritted teeth she whispered, "From today onwards, if Duke is mean to Pingting, Pingting will be 100 times meaner to herself. No matter what, I only have one life, wasting it is fine too. Duke might as well give up."

She was in Chu Beijie's warm arms and felt his whole body stiffen as he muttered, "How many times do you plan to go against me?"

"A hundred times is not enough. Even a thousand times isn't enough." She answered in a very low voice, without a shred of apology.

Twice as angrier than before, Chu Beijie rose but was stopped by two slender arms wrapped around him. He looked down and saw tears had filled her face. Her teardrops delicately balanced on her ivory-like skin, falling yet not falling. Her snow white teeth tightly bit onto her bottom lip, refusing to let others hear the sound of her sobs.

Her bright profound eyes were not afraid of his sharp gaze, desolately earnest and ultimately they did not seem to be concealing hidden intentions.

His anger vanished immediately at that very moment like a hundred years of refined steel suddenly malleable once more.

"So hateful! So evil!" Chu Beijie hugged her tightly and seemed to want to plunge her into his own bones. "You're so hateful Bai Pingting! Evil Bai Pingting...."

The sun hid behind the clouds; delicate snowflakes slowly drifted down once more.

It wasn't a problem though. The room was incredibly warm. Although it was winter, the room seemed to be a landscape in spring.

Hongqian stole a look, blushing furiously. Her expression was immediately replaced with a frown. "You've messed up. The soup isn't even finished. That

isn't good, is it?"

Zuiju smiled faintly. "There are people caring for Miss Bai's body, so why should we? Come, since it's snowing so wonderfully, we should quickly go into the yard and build a snowman."

No longer caring the affectionate flirting in the house, the aftermath from battles of love and fate, everyone else looked outside, to the yard piled high with snow.

Dear Teacher, it seems that the Duke has fallen for such a pain-in-the-neck kind of girl.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 30

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch30

The invincible Duke of Zhen-Bei of the battlefields was defeated by the Bai Pingting who did not fear death.

He was not convinced nor willing to submit.

Just that when he looked into her two eyes, all of the displeasure and dissatisfaction disappeared.

Who told him to harden his heart or use ruthless means?

Who knew Pingting would expose such a beaming innocent smile from seeing his expression or by relaxing his brows, show even the slightest bit of compassion would result in so much in return, making it truly the world's most worthwhile action?

Bai Pingting was as relaxed and free as a willow branch swaying in spring breeze. She felt merry. She understood that compromises were useless and, in all fairness, intended to take the initiative to recover from her eight months of suffering.

Until then she would get out of the bed to admire the snow.

Hongqian cleared out the pavilion and asked Moran to bring the qin, before fetching the alcohol.

Chu Beijie had yet to enter the room when he already heard the sound of qin floating through the walls.

He paused, narrowed his eyes and listened.

Distant and light; calm and happy.

As free as clouds drifting, as strict the orbits of the moon and stars and an ample laziness that made anything seem possible with time.

Only mountains would stand quietly, straight and unyielding. Numerous small animals were on the mountain, not afraid of the wind and snow. The moment the snow stopped, out they came with snowball fights. They dug snow caves and picked the final few pinecones of a tree, forming a scene of fierce competition. What exhilaration!

Chu Beijie couldn't help himself, but he wanted to be closer to the qin sound. Proudly, he turned into the courtyard where there was a small pavilion, a guqin, good alcohol, some servants, and the incredibly merry, yet incredibly lazy woman who held his heart.

Ping! The qin sound was stopped by an abnormal noise.

Chu Beijie paled in shock. His mind raced as he flew into the pavilion. "What's wrong?"

Pingting lowered her head, holding her right hand. Her index finger had been sliced by the sudden break of the string, causing a single thin wound.

"Why are you so careless?" Chu Beijie's eyebrows were tightly knitted. He grabbed the soft hand. "Does it hurt?"

Hongqian peered behind Chu Beijie, hurriedly saying, "I will get the medicine."

Bright red blood slowly escaped from the fingertip, forming a thin stream. Chu Beijie's thundering expression was both from anger and frustration. "Why play qin on such a cold day?" He remained irritated by the red blood. He grabbed the white jade finger and placed it in his mouth, causing the taste of blood to melt in his mouth.

Pingting couldn't help laughing, her eyebrows forming crescent shapes as her wound was licked by Chu Beijie's fiery and moist tongue.

"Still laughing?" Chu Beijie's face darkened and used his imposing General attitude to suppress the surrounding air. "You mustn't be so careless next time." He let go of her finger, no longer bleeding, and grabbed her by the wrist. "Let's go into the room."

Pingting refused to budge.

Chu Beijie turned back to look at her. "Hm?" he asked with a frown.

Pingting's energetic eyes were rolling and lazily held up the other, perfectly intact index finger, "This one also wants to be kissed by the Duke."

The more she received, the more she wanted. It seemed that after a while, the dignified Duke of Zhen-Bei would become an incompetent fool who would only obey his wife?

Chu Beijie's expression darkened. "Quit messing around. Let's go inside..."

Before his words left his lips, Pingting's expression was replaced by a cold one. She placed her finger between her mouth and unhesitantly bit down hard.

"You..." Chu Beijie forcefully grabbed her other hand, but it was already too late. Her left hand that was once pretty and perfect had now met an unexpected calamity. It had deep teeth marks, cruelly betrayed by its owner.

Blood slowly oozed out from the teeth marks.

"What was that for?" Chu Beijie was afraid of her doing stupid things again. He tightly held onto her hands. His eyebrows were locked in a tight frown as he grinded his teeth.

Pingting did not care her hands had been damaged and leaned into Chu Beijie's arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Pfft." She laughed.

Her face returned to its usual colour. She lifted her head and looked at Chu Beijie. "As long as Duke is worried about Pingting, what else matters even if these two hands go to waste and never play qin again?" Her voice was soft.

Her words were relaxed and calmed, without any hint of falsehood.

Chu Beijie's heart was jolted. He held her fiercely to himself. In a low voice he ordered, "Your life and death, honour and disgrace are mine. You mustn't neglect nor harm yourself. If you violate this, then I'll punish you according to the army's ways."

The corners of Pingting's eyes wavered and she took a deep breath in Chu

Beijie's arms. Looking into the depths of his eyes, she replied, "The army's ways are harsh, so Pingting will surrender herself."

Leaning against Chu Beijie's chest, feeling his strong muscles ripple, she felt the powerful force that belonged to him.

Pingting closed her two eyes, lightly sucking her lip. "Swallows bring fortune, but too much fortune brings damage. A joy to look, a joy to look..."

Chu Beijie listened while hugging what seemed to be the world's most fragile treasure, that was also the most likely to vanish.

A trace of a sweet smile escaped from his manly face.

It was the Zhen-Bei Ducal Prefecture like back then, when Pingting was still in his arms, singing beautiful songs.

The song was there, the melody was there and the person was there.

The sun, stars and moon were there; the sky and earth were there.

The Bai Pingting in his arms remained.

From that day on, Pingting's clear singing was often heard from the small pavilion.

Listening and listening to the tactful, moving music, made others jealous of the man by her side, hugging her.

To Hongqian, these changes were a mixture of surprise and delight. She quietly told Zuiju, "See? Because of their grudge, they were literally at each other's throat. Now that it's all resolved, it's as great as now. The Duke is a famous general, but to the woman he loves, he had to admit defeat too. Sigh, as expected even amazing people become softhearted when in love."

Zuiju deftly prepared Pingting's food and turned to see Hongqian leaning in the doorway, watching the two people snuggling by the lake. "The Duke is a strong opponent, yet Miss Bai is an opponent of another league. I really wonder how the skies have brought these two to collide," she exclaimed.

Hongqian turned around. "But it's the collision that makes life interesting. Who else apart from Miss Bai is a suitable woman for our Duke?"

Zuiju lightly replied, "Observers may find this amusing, but no person of the loop ever knows how many hardships lie ahead. Have you already forgotten about the incident of the two princes?"

Mentioning the two princes of Dong Lin, Hongqian could no longer laugh either. She looked beyond Zuiju.

Zuiju turned around to see Moran standing expressionlessly behind her.

"Don't mention that again." Moran coldly replied.

"Yes."

Zuiju answered, and glanced at the silhouette of the two figures.

Does not mentioning mean you could forget?

Pingting fully enjoyed Chu Beijie's love, after enduring eight months of silent treatment. Looking at Chu Beijie's begrudging yet utterly helpless expression, she dearly loved the darkness it casted on his face. Despite all his superiority, he personally made the porridge and fed her the medicine. Putting down all of his work, Chu Beijie accompanied her to see the sunrises, sunsets, and the movement of the stars and moon.

Many of her wishes had been granted. She leaned in his arms, listening to the winter snow. She asked him to pick the most beautiful plum blossom in the residence, and to put it in her hair.

Everything was a perfect dream, a dream floating on a gray shadow. Pingting and Chu Beijie indulged themselves to ignore the shadow that must never be forgotten.

"Pingting has done something very stupid."

"Oh?" Chu Beijie felt the chill of the night, but she cried that she wanted to watch the stars. He had to open the window. While holding her tightly, he casually asked, "For example?"

"For example, to the Duke..." In the middle of her sentence, she closed her small lips, her bright eyes looking thoughtfully at Chu Beijie. Then she laughed self-deprecatingly, "I have a very stupid wish."

Chu Beijie lowered his head and examined her. "How stupid?"

Pingting shifted her gaze towards the shadows casted by the trees in the bright half-moon. For a while, she remained silent before saying, “Stupid that I want the Duke to not change his mind about me, regardless the hundreds and thousands of twists and turns beyond.” There was a trace of a bitter smile as she whispered, “The clever Bai Pingting, the stupid Bai Pingting, the kind Bai Pingting and the evil Bai Pingting...will always be the Bai Pingting loved by the Duke?”

There was no expression on Chu Beijie’s face, but the colour on his face gradually darkened. “Don’t say any more.” He reached out and shut away the colour and light of the starry sky. He firmly, yet gently, pushed Pingting onto a soft mattress.

“It’s too cold. Go to sleep soon.”

He undid Pingting’s clothing proficiently and took off her heavy coat, revealing the white silk garment underneath. With a wave of his hand, Pingting was wrapped up in a blanket, leaving only her face exposed. He himself undressed in a few moments and wriggled into the bundle. He grabbed her thin waist, allowing the side of Pingting’s face to rest on his chest.

“Duke...”

“Sleep obediently. Don’t think about useless things.”

In a huff, he blew out the last lit candle in the room.

The inky black eyes full of wisdom were not closed but full of light melancholy.

The two stuck tightly to each other, listening to the other’s heartbeats the sound of flowing blood.

“Cough...cough cough...”

“What?” Chu Beijie’s strong and sturdy body moved, his hand moving towards Pingting’s forehead.

“Noth...cough cough cough cough....” Pingting tried to muffle her cough.

“Your prescription doesn’t seem to work. A few doses have made it even worse. I’ll get Zuiju to look at you. Even if you don’t trust in the skill of those doctors, there’s no way you don’t trust in Huo Yunan’s disciple.” Chu Beijie said while propping himself off the bed, preparing to call Zuiju.

Pingting also lazily sat up, stopping him. “Even if I do need to see one, seeing one right now makes no difference. Why not tomorrow? If we do something so chaotic, I’ll have even more difficulty sleeping.”

Chu Beijie carefully studied her eyebrows, which indeed had a hint of sleep. He nodded, cuddling her to sleep once more. He ordered, “You must sleep properly, and don’t think any more useless things.”

Charcoal crackled as it burned in the furnace.

Pingting closed her eyes and obediently went to sleep.

The next day, Zuiju was summoned in the early morning. Entering the room, she saw there was no one on Pingting’s currently favourite couch, so she simply stood out in the atrium until she heard Chu Beijie’s deep voice saying, “We’re inside.”

Zuiju went in.

Chu Beijie was already up and fully dressed. There was a fine layer of sweat on his forehead as if he been practicing his swordsmanship. Pingting was still lying on the bed and tried to get up when she saw Zuiju entering. Chu Beijie stopped her. “When I wanted her to come yesterday night, you stubbornly refused. Now that you’re like this, you still try to pointlessly move about? Lie down obediently and let Zuiju take your pulse.”

Zuiju stepped forward and sat by the bed. She smiled at Pingting, “Rest assured, Miss Bai, my Teacher says I am proficient in the field.” She reached out her hand into the warm blankets, gently grasping Pingting’s wrist and brought it out.

Before she could intently listen to her pulse, she was interrupted by a gust of wind from the opening door. The door curtain was suddenly lifted and Moran appeared at the doorway, his expression serious. “Duke, a private letter from the Royal House.”

Chu Beijie’s thick eyebrows rose in surprise. “A private letter from the Royal House?”

“The King’s private letter.”

Chu Beijie's expression was suddenly serious. His waist straightened like a javelin. "Go to the office," he instructed Moran.

He took two steps before turning back to Zuiju. "Take her pulse properly, administer medicine carefully and determine the root of her sickness. Her general health isn't too good, so don't use strong medicines." Then he strode out in large steps, hurriedly leaving.

The two entered the office at different times. When Moran entered the room, he quickly shut the door behind him and took out the letter from his sleeves.

Chu Beijie took it, observing the royal seal. There were a few tiny words written on the letter: "Confidential to Beijie". Indeed, this letter was from his only brother, personally written by the King of Dong Lin. Ominously, his heart thumped. Because of the poisoning of the two princes, he had led a raging storm through the capital, a mutiny full of battle-hardened soldiers. The ordeal ended with parting from the King of Dong Lin dejectedly.

After such bitter misfortune, unless it was the last resort, there was no way the King of Dong Lin would send a personal letter.

Chu Beijie and the King of Dong Lin were born from the same mother, and the two brothers had been intimate from childhood. One made the decisions of a King, while the other loyally led troops to defend the country, their feelings completely without friction. Although Chu Beijie had angrily and heartbreakingly sworn a life of seclusion, the ties of flesh and blood override hearts. How could he not worry about his brother, in the faraway capital, after such an urgent letter?

Chu Beijie broke open the seal, unfolded the letter and read it attentively.

The letter was not long and was undoubtedly written by the King of Duke without scribes. The more Chu Beijie read, the dire his expression became. Moran couldn't help becoming increasingly worried. He waited breathlessly.

Chu Beijie read the entire letter and held his hands behind his back. It was a long time before he replied, "Yun Chang and Bei Mo have formed an alliance and sent three hundred thousand soldiers to pressure my Dong Lin's borders."

Moran had accompanied Chu Beijie on the battlefield through fire and water,

so he fully understood the military strength of the four countries. The Bei Mo army was clearly not strong in battle a year earlier. The Yun Chang who've always occupied a corner was surprising since they had a lot of potential due to their constant neutrality. He thought for a while before asking, "Which general has Yun Chang sent to command the troops?"

Although Chu Beijie's expression was heavy, he still managed to give him a pleased look, "Moran really does get straight to the point. There's a great improvement." A light flashed in his eyes as he spat, "He Xia."

"He Xia?" Moran had already guessed this a little, but he couldn't help but frown when hearing Chu Beijie's reply. "His strength and strategies are extremely good. I'm afraid that on Duke has the ability to rival him. Hmph, Yun Chang has finally sent out their Prince Consort. I'm afraid that Miss Bai..."

"Pingting doesn't know anything." Chu Beijie replied, "She doesn't need to have any contact with these kind of things any more."

Moran nodded in agreement. "Indeed." He then thought back to Dong Lin's military affairs and hesitated before saying, "Even though the army borne of Yun Chang and Bei Mo's alliance is said to be three hundred thousand, in reality there is only at most one hundred and fifty thousand. With the current strength of Dong Lin's army with Duke accompanying them, coupled with Duke's former, special group of warriors, there is enough to resist the enemy."

Chu Beijie's gaze was far away. There was a slightly bitter smile on his handsome, angular face. "I never thought that my Dong Lin who has conducted wars and pressured other countries' borders would have its own border pressured one day? It seems that it was indeed my greatest fault in not capturing Bei Mo's capital in one fell swoop. As a result, they've allied with Yun Chang."

Moran immediately closed his mouth, refusing to say anything. Bai Pingting had damaged the Battle of Bei Mo. The process had been complex. Moran knew what had happened, better than anyone else. Bai Pingting was Chu Beijie's Achilles heel.

Chu Beijie's expression was enigmatic and held no clues to decipher.

A tense atmosphere filled the room, causing breathlessness to the people

inside. Moran waited anxiously before forcing himself to ignorantly change the subject. “The enemy is advancing step by step, and the opposing general is the widely acclaimed He Xia. Without Duke’s commands, I’m afraid my Dong Lin’s army will not be able to resist very long. Does Duke plan to immediately return to the capital and prepare for war?”

Chu Beijie’s large back straightened, determined. There was a faint hint of his heroic, influential battlefield style as he sneered, “I may be living in seclusion, but the country is in trouble and He Xia is harming my Dong Lin. How can I just sit back and watch? I shall set off immediately.”

Moran hesitated, not knowing how to react. Chu Beijie turned around, “I shall rush to the capital by horse, to see my Brother.”

“Duke?”

Chu Beijie waved a hand to stop Moran, commanding, “It’s enough to have me on the battlefield. You lead the guards to protect this place and protect Pingting.” His tone lowered as he looked out the window, at the morning light in the east. In a cold voice he added, “The Queen has never forgotten her hatred for the assassination of her two sons, so she must have secretly sent some spies here, waiting for the opportunity to harm Pingting. You should know what to do.”

Moran replied in order, “I have also sent spies to them beforehand. The Queen’s spies are good in skill but few in number. The remaining guards, both in number and skill, are enough to deal with them. I am just a little worried that after the Duke is gone, perhaps the Queen will decide to fully eradicate Miss Bai and mobilise the army...”

“Can she mobilise the army of Dong Lin to attack my residence?” Chu Beijie’s deep voice was full of confidence. “That is also the reason I want you to stay. As long as you stand at the front door, what general dares to act rashly?”

That was true as no one dared to go against Chu Beijie in the army. Moran was the most trusted confidant, making him the best representative of Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie lifted his head, seemingly thinking deeply about something. His gaze swept lightly across the wall, before walking forwards and picking up the precious sword that never left his side on the battlefield. He held it in his palm,

touching it gently.

Inside another building.

A trace of surprise leaked from Zuiju's eyes.

Zuiju removed her fingers from Pingting's wrist before directing her sparkling, bright eyes to look at Pingting.

There was smile in Pingting's lips, one full of sweetness that could not be easily dispersed. She nodded gently.

Zuiju sucked in a long breath, whispering, "When did you know?"

"When I grew suspicious, I took my own pulse."

"No wonder you refused to let the doctor take your pulse." Zuiju studied her deeply before sighing, "Miss, you messed around far too much. You knew yet still did something like refusing to eat. If the Duke was really heartless, then wouldn't two lives have died in vain?" She shook her head in disapproval, asking again, "Does the Duke know?"

Pingting hadn't always been a romantic yet now she was unusually shy. She lowered her voice, "Can I personally tell him?"

Zuiju thought a little and nodded her head. "Fine. But let me tell Miss first, you have already ruined your body enough. From now on, you have to be carefully nursed back to health and eat a proper diet, all under my instructions. You mustn't play qin in the snow or stargaze in the cold wind. If you don't listen to me, I will get the Duke to come over and have him ban you from moving. You will not even be allowed get out of the bed."

The more she said, the more serious she was. Pingting couldn't help laughing and softened her voice, "Understood. Pingting knows she was wrong."

Her voice was melodius, and her posture was elegant. She had a faint smile, her brows and eyes relaxed. With her soft words, Zuiju couldn't continue to scold her but helplessly shake her head in exasperation.

In her heart, Zuiju sighed, as she realised that this was what a charming, unrivalled beauty was like. When they were finally in role, they were unstoppable unmatched romantics that could not be resisted by anyone.

She had the ability to make Chu Beijie happy and the ability to make Chu Beijie worried. Zuiju was still sighing to herself when a glimpse of Chu Beijie entering the room made her hurriedly stand up.

“Duke’s here.”

“Have you taken her pulse?” Chu Beijie asked, “How is her sickness?”

Zuiju’s eyes flicked towards Pingting, replying, “Nothing much, she just has to carefully restore her health back. Zuiju will now leave to prescribe the medicine.” She left the room, giving Pingting an opportunity to be alone with Chu Beijie.

Pingting leaned on the bed, her eyes following Chu Beijie’s every movement. She watched Chu Beijie lean towards her. He revealed a more delighted smile than usual. She took the initiative and tugged at Chu Beijie’s sleeve, saying, “Sit here Duke, Pingting has something to tell you.”

As Chu Beijie sat down, Pingting’s gaze fell on the sword on his hand. “Is the Duke going to practice? Why are you holding onto your precious sword?” she asked curiously.

“I’m going to hurry back to the capital.” Chu Beijie looked deeply into the eyes of the most beautiful woman and handed the sword to her. “Do you still recognise this sword? I have two swords, one is Parting Soul, which has been given to He Xia to symbolise the five-year truce to Gui Le. This is Divine Spirit, a set with Parting Soul.”

When Pingting heard that Chu Beijie was going to leave, her face was wiped of its original joy. She took the heavy sword, lowered her head to stare at the exquisite patterns on the scabbard and was speechless.

Chu Beijie then said, “It is remote here, so I leave Moran and the guards here to protect you. If...if the unthinkable happens here, send someone by a fast horse with this sword to the Dragon Tiger Barracks twenty miles north of here and ask General Chen Mu to help. He recognises my sword.”

When he finished, he saw that Pingting’s face was full of loneliness. He raised his large, rough hands smoothing the hair on her forehead. “Why so silent?”

Pingting placed the Precious Divine Spirit Sword down and slowly leaned towards Chu Beijie’s chest, deeply breathing as if trying to draw strength from

there. A moment passed before she asked in a lowered voice, "Is the Duke going to war? Who dares to attack Dong Lin?" She felt Chu Beijie stiffen slightly and immediately reached out, covering his mouth. She raised her head towards him, "Duke doesn't need to explain to Pingting. Pingting is no longer concerned about anything apart from Duke now."

Chu Beijie saw this as delicate and charming. He couldn't help but tightly hug her. He lowered his voice, "Didn't you have something to tell me?"

Pingting calmly watched him for a while, asking, "Pingting passed her birthday alone, so as for Duke's birthday, could we be together?"

Chu Beijie was born on the sixth of the first lunar month, leaving only fifteen days. If he had to rush back to make it on a fast horse, he could spend no longer than four days at the Royal Residence.

As the same time, the situation of the army and borders were unknown, Chu Beijie could not easily determine whether he could get away from the Royal Residence in just four days.

He didn't want to disappoint Pingting, so he remained silent without answering.

Pingting did not mind this, her eyes hiding warm laughter. She raised her head towards Chu Beijie, "Duke is a natural general. Eleven days is enough to travel to and from the Royal Residence and four days is enough for Duke to gain favour with the King's troops. Pingting is not greedy, just hoping that Duke will come to see Pingting once before heading out to the battlefield. On Duke's birthday, Pingting wants to tell Duke something very important."

Chu Beijie's heart thumped, asking, "Something important? Can't you tell me now?"

The white and black parts of Pingting's eyes revealed a little stubbornness and obstinacy. She shook her head, "It's something very important and must be said on an unforgettable and auspicious day."

Chu Beijie was about to ask more, when Moran had already marched into the room, reporting, "Duke, everything has been prepared."

He then studied the figure in the room, carefully asking, "Perhaps you would

like to set off at a later time?”

“No, I must set off immediately.” Chu Beijie released Pingting and placed her on her pillow. He watched her undoubtedly beautiful black hair spread out. A look of pity appeared on his chiselled face. He finally opened his mouth, “I’ll try to hurry back soon.”

Seeing infinite joy suddenly replacing the deep gaze of her bright eyes, he turned and stepped out of the door.

The best horse, fed with the best grain, was already tipping and tapping outside the entrance.

Chu Beijie launched himself onto the horse, his blazing eyes sweeping towards Moran.

Moran gritted his teeth and heavily nodded back.

Chu Beijie then lowered his gaze and called towards the staying guards. “I shall go to the Royal Residence to receive the King’s commands. I will return before heading towards the border to handle the troops there. Everyone, make sure to guard properly. Do not make any mistakes!”

All of the guards were borne of the battlefield and each was a battle-hardened veteran. Hearing enemy soldiers threatening their country made their veins boil. The moment Chu Beijie spoke, morale boomed and everyone thundered “yes”.

Chu Beijie faintly smiled and whipped the horse, causing the four hooves to quicken and blow away the snow.

A back view full of arrogant pride seemed even more noticeable further away than near.

Pingting remained in the room, calmly propping herself to a sit.

She heard the distant cries beyond the way, and her eyebrow fretted slightly. She knew that Chu Beijie had departed, leaving her heart empty.

“Does the Duke know?”

She lifted her head, only realising that Zuiju had entered the room some time ago.

“The sixth of the first lunar month is his birthday, I will tell him on that day.”

Zuiju was puzzled and her voice was a little anxious. “It’s already good enough if Miss tells the Duke, why on earth would you drag it to the sixth of the first lunar month? Sigh, why is it that the more intelligent a person, the more mysteries they like to make? If this goes on, something is going to happen even if nothing is supposed to happen.”

Pingting frowned, shaking her head. “I don’t know why but the Duke suddenly said that he had to immediately return to the capital. I suddenly worried. I’m really scared that something terrible will happen in Dong Lin’s capital. In the critical moments, the Duke may have to make dangerous decisions, meaning the fewer considerations, the better. It’s better not to tell the Duke the news of my pregnancy. Let’s not add to his worries,” she replied thoughtfully.”

Zuiju surprisedly measured Pingting’s expression. She relaxed her voice, “Moran once said that Miss has the sight of a thousand miles. Listening to Miss’ tone, perhaps you already have some clues about what is happening?”

“Clues about what?” Pingting’s smile was wry. “I have been without news of the outside world for a long time now.”

Yangfeng’s last letter only mentioned that she and Ze Yin had gone into a life of seclusion with no other details.

Perhaps Yangfeng didn’t want to tire her body and mind by participating in those annoying battles for power.

Bei Mo had been at war with both Dong Lin and Gui Le once, resulting in massive damage to the troops. Until now, the only country that had the potential to challenge Dong Lin was Yun Chang which had always been outside the picture.

However, why did Yun Chang shift from its national policy of defense and non-attack towards threatening the powerful military of Dong Lin?

She turned back and saw Zuiju, a gentle smile escaping from her face. “Don’t worry, no matter what happens, there are two things I’m absolutely sure about.”

Zuiju couldn’t help asking, “Which two?” after hearing her soft voice full of confidence.

“First, no matter how powerful the enemy is, the Duke can still gain victory.”

Zuiju agreed with this point and she nodded. “Then the second?” she asked again.

“The second?” Pingting’s eyes brightened, revealing a hint of pride. “No matter where the Duke is, as long as I am in danger, he will definitely come back to me in time.”

Zuiju was stunned.

Why did this smart, tough girl who tested the Duke over and over again put so much confidence in the Duke’s affection at this time?

Pingting approved of Zuiju’s stunned expression, revealing two shallow dimples. She lazily stretched out, “As long as these two points are guaranteed, why should I waste energy on other things? Ah, Zuiju, you must look after the child properly in my tummy so when the Duke returns, I can tell him the good news super healthy and glowing.”

Zuiju answered and went outside to look at the herbs she had brewed for Pingting. When she reached the courtyard, she happened to see Moran who had just sent off Chu Beijie.

Moran said, “The Duke has left. Why is your expression so strange? Has anything happened to Miss Bai?”

Her expression was a little nervous.

Zuiju shook her head and seriously thought for a while, revealing an expression exclusive to teenage girls. She faintly sighed, “I now understand that a woman finding the man of her dreams is something seriously reassuring.”

She sighed consecutively several more times, both sentimentally and enviously. She then went to see the herbs, leaving behind a baffled Moran.

Chu Beijie was on the roads on a fast horse, moving rapidly away from the secluded area like an agile pigeon flapping its wings in the sky.

This general, one who shook the four countries, was soon away from the mountains and forests of seclusion, bringing his distinguished presence back into the world once more.

At Dong Lin's Royal Residence, the majestic King of Dong Lin slowly paced back and forth in the, accompanied by only four personal maids. The Queen of Dong Lin stopped her track at the wooden door and held her maids back, entering alone.

"King," she slowly sat on the Dong Lin King's bed, looking at her husband's face. The Queen of Dong Lin asked, her voice full of concern, "Does King not feel better after eating the genius Doctor Huo's pills?"

The King of Dong Lin let out a comforting smile and held the Queen's wrist, "Sorry I made my Queen worry." His gaze shifted towards the empty doorway, "Any news from my Brother?"

"I just received the news. The Duke of Zhen-Bei has already left and will soon arrive at the capital." The Queen relayed the news from the reporting letter. "He did not take any men and left alone. I have already ordered the Senior Official to pass on the instructions to the town officials, so they can properly look after of him."

She paused, before lowering her eyes. "The Duke of Zhen-Bei...as expected, left Pingting behind."

"It's because he doesn't want to hurt you. He doesn't want Bai Pingting to appear before us, therefore has reluctantly left his woman behind." The King of Dong Lin coughed twice, his pale face revealing an unnatural shade of red. His eyes darkened, "Has everything been prepared?"

The Queen nodded, helplessly sighing. She softly comforted him, "Don't blame yourself, King. Any member of the royal family would consider it an honor to sacrifice themselves for the country."

Even though she said this, her always dignified and unemotional face couldn't help reveal a trace of sadness.

The massive battles of Gui Le and Bei Mo had caused some loss to Dong Lin's military power, but it was Chu Beijie's retirement to a life of seclusion after leading a mutiny that had delivered a huge blow on the once-powerful country of Dong Lin.

Had Chu Beijie completely given up his military power and continued his life of

seclusion, it would be difficult to measure the extent of the cracks in Dong Lin's power.

But even so, the morale of the Dong Lin's army had been shaken.

In just one short year, the power of the four countries had shifted and shockingly, the one who had gradually profited the most from this shift of military power had been the new Prince Consort of Yun Chang, He Xia.

This alliance between the armies of Yun Chang and Bei Mo had resulted in three hundred thousand enemy soldiers approaching menacingly. Although Dong Lin had always been a country of dominance, they had been at loss for once, giving birth to the emotion of fear.

The Queen of Dong Lin had intercepted He Xia's handwritten confidential letters. The three hundred thousand troops that were arriving just wanted a single woman.

Just a woman.

Just a...Bai Pingting.

The woman who murdered her two juvenile sons, the woman who Chu Beijie hated to bits yet loved to bits seemed to be the saviour of Dong Lin at the moment.

Wasn't that truly ironic?

Wasn't that truly embarrassing?

It was such a bizarre thing, yet there was no room for doubt on He Xia's personally written letter, covered with the official seal of Yun Chang, including Princess Yaotian's handwritten initials.

The King of Dong Lin summoned his most trusted officials before discussing by the bedside.

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei refuses to hand over Bai Pingting."

"My Brother will fight and win this war for us."

"King," The Senior Official, Chu Zairan, knelt down. His words were direct and full of pain, "With the current enemy's troops, even if the Duke of Zhen-Bei can

win, it will be a bloody battle. Dong Lin's soldiers will suffer innumerable casualties."

The King of Dong Lin studied the elderly officials that had accompanied them for so many years, not making any sound.

For all those young men's lives, his Dong Lin's Royal House and the officials that protected them, it was just not worth it for just a single woman even if it was the dearest woman to Chu Beijie.

If Chu Beijie was still Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, then he should know that it wasn't worth it.

"Queen..." The King of Dong Lin called his much-worn wife in the chambers, at the dead of the night.

He watched the resolute and noble expression on the Queen's face for a long time. The King of Dong Lin then sighed, "I know that the Queen has sent troops to camp near Brother's secluded residence and have prepared to ambush them to avenge your murdered our murdered children."

The Queen's expression did not change as she frankly replied, "Yes."

"But the Queen has never sent the order to do so."

The Queen laughed self-deprecatingly, her expression dark. "After all, she is the most beloved woman of the Duke of Zhen-Bei. If I really ordered them to do it, then the brotherhood between King and the Duke of Zhen-Bei will be completely drained away. He...is not only King's own younger brother but also the protector of Dong Lin as the Duke of Zhen-Bei. He is Dong Lin's moat that is unable to be attacked. No matter how ignorant I am, I would not destroy this country's supporting column for my own feelings."

The King of Dong Lin had been married to her for many years and knew she was thinking of their two dead sons. A knife pierced his heart. He grabbed her soft body in his arms, holding tightly. "Don't worry Queen, I know."

How could Chu Beijie, his brother, Dong Lin's greatest general, the Duke of Zhen-Bei that shook the four countries, forgive the woman who poisoned the young Dong Lin princes?

The Queen turned away, holding back her tears. She calmly asked, "He Xia has kept his word and has retreated ten miles away from the border, awaiting further news. Has the King decided yet?"

The King of Dong Lin closed his eyes and thought for a long time. When he finally opened his eyes, he said, "Send out a letter, allowing He Xia and his men towards Brother's secluded residence and take away Bai Pingting. As for the capital, make Brother stay at the Royal Residence at all costs until Bai Pingting is taken away."

The King of Dong Lin's personal letter was then sent to Chu Beijie, who had been deep in love with Bai Pingting, and just like that, made the Chu Beijie, who could not forget the matters of his country, reluctantly leave Bai Pingting's side.

Chu Beijie had already left and arrived at the outskirts of the capital by daytime. He had no idea that every step of the horse he rode danced closer towards the palm of the Royal House who knew everything, closer towards the palm of his only brother, the King of Dong Lin.

In the Royal Residence, the two were unattended.

The Queen looked at the increasingly sickly King of Dong Lin and finally asked the question the officials were afraid to mention before him.

"When the enemy soldiers retreat and the Duke of Zhen-Bei learns that Bai Pingting has been taken away by He Xia's men, how should we explain to him?"

The King of Dong Lin's face was drained of colour. Despite his melancholy, there was a likeness to Chu Beijie's strong determination. With the certainty and pride suitable to a King, he replied, "No need for an explanation. As long as he is my Brother, as long as he is still the Duke of Zhen-Bei, as long as he still has a trace of the fiery blood of Dong Lin's Royal House, then he should understand how to face and choose in the best interests of this country."

The Royal House was one that gave up their own spirit by replacing it with their country and its people.

No matter how beloved the woman, it was not as important as a patch of Dong Lin's barren soil. Just as the King of Dong Lin was upset over losing his sons, the cost of losing Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei was much too great.

He could never forget that Chu Beijie, his only Brother, was forever the Dong Lin's battlefield's representative, the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Until then, day and night, Chu Beijie passionately listened to Pingting's leisurely singing in her room.

They had no idea that that a life of seclusion was never one for them to have.

Power, war, strategy, and even affection made up the complicated woven web that now lay before them.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 31

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch31

Chu Beijie arrived at the capital in the misty, early hours of the morning.

In the distance, the tall city entrance stood, majestic and yet imposing, seeming both familiar yet distant. Beijie squinted and stared for a long time before finally riding forward to meet his welcoming party and dismounting.

“Duke!”

“Our Duke is back!”

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei is finally back!”

The welcoming party not only included government officials but also the many peasants of the city who crowded on both sides of the road. Their mighty general has finally returned.

Their eyes sparkled with endless joy. Only the few high-ranking Dong Lin officials knew the hidden agenda of this occasion and quietly looked away, staying calm and collected, trying desperately to hide the anxiety that would no doubt be present in their eyes.

The head of the welcoming party was Chu Zairan, a court elder and highly respected Dong Lin official. He stood at the front, leading the countless officials behind him and paid his respects to Chu Beijie, “Duke has finally returned to us.” Nothing could conceal the joy and excitement in his wise, old eyes.

“Senior Official.” Chu Beijie gestured for the loyal official, who had given up most of his life to serve his country, to rise. Handing his reins to an attendant behind him, Chu Beijie stepped forward and asked, “How is the situation?”

“Not good.” Chu Zairan and Chu Beijie strode towards the palace, nodding to

acknowledge the cheers of the peasants, “The King has fallen ill.”

“Brother?” Chu Beijie froze for a moment before continuing his strides forward. With a furrowed brow he solemnly asked, “How did this happen?”

“Ever since Duke’s departure to live in seclusion, the King has been unwell. His chest pain has become unbearable. He isn’t able to fall asleep at night. He’s been lingering on his deathbed more many days now.” Chu Zairan’s voice was heavy with sorrow, “Even without the looming war with Yun Chang , Bei Mo and their armies pressing against our borders, I would have begged for Duke’s return.”

Chu Beijie felt his heart sinking.

Meanwhile, news of Chu Beijie’s departure from his secluded residence had already reached a certain residence deep in the mountains near Bei Mo’s borders.

Yangfeng suddenly raised her head and gazed at Ze Yin with a stricken look, “He Xia’s armies are pressed against the borders yet Chu Beijie would actually leave Pingting behind and head to the capital by himself?”

Ze Yin nods solemnly and replied, “Yes.”

“Oh God!” Yangfeng painfully exclaimed, falling into the mahogany chair behind her, clutching the handle desperately and hiding her face. “Pingting must not have told Chu Beijie the truth of what happened yet, otherwise he would never have left her there to avoid rousing suspicion. He must still believe that He Xia and Pingting are still master and servant and has no idea what He Xia had done to her.”

Ze Yin watched, his heart breaking at the sight of his beloved wife suffering, and ordered servants to bring out their innocent and carefree infant son. Gently placing the baby into Yangfeng’s arms, he cradled her. “Chu Beijie is a true hero and a man among men; he will definitely protect his woman.”

Yangfeng pressed the back of her soft and small hands against Ze Yin’s palms and mournfully uttered, “I can never forget the look on Pingting’s face when she talked about He Xia right before she left. I just don’t understand, how could our King be so for mere riches ally himself with He Xia and send his armies to Dong Lin? Doesn’t he realise what would happen by enraging Chu Beijie?” She

suddenly stopped in realisation and looked up at her Ze Yin's comforting gaze and asked, "Why are you so calm? Does my dear husband see something else in this situation?"

Ze Yin felt great unease regarding the situation, realising Yangfeng was staring at him awaiting his reply. He solemnly acknowledged her, "When the allied armies arrived at the border, He Xia immediately commanded them to retreat 10 miles. From this I believe He Xia doesn't intend to go to war against Dong Lin but instead wants to use the armies to threaten Dong Lin in order to obtain something."

Yangfeng gazed at her husband, her glistening black eyes unblinking, waiting for him to continue.

Ze Yin sighed, "If Chu Beijie returns and leads his army against the allied troops, it is inevitable that both sides will suffer heavy losses."

The meaning behind his words were very clear.

Whatever his request, the King of Dong Lin would have to comply or else risk suffering heavy losses in war.

What could He Xia possibly desire that the King of Dong Lin would definitely give up?

Yangfeng stiffened at her realisation.

With her eyes widening and heart skipping out of rhythm, Yangfeng clutched desperately at Ze Yin's robes, the joints in her hands whitening at the tightness of her clenched fist.

"Pingting!" She cried out, looking at Ze Yin, "He wants Pingting!"

Ze Yin lowered his head. Looking at his beloved's pale face, he slowly nodded.

"Why?" Yangfeng spat out between clenched teeth, "Has he not done enough yet to her? That cruel-hearted He Xia." Anger bubbling in her chest, she suddenly stood up looking out the window at the snowcovered mountains before her.

She must not allow Pingting to be hurt again.

Taking a few deep breaths of the cold wintery air, still facing the window with her back to him, Yangfeng composed herself and sweetly asked Ze Yin, "Would

my dear husband please grant me a favour?"

"Do you wish for me to write a letter to Pingting?"

"No." Yangfeng turned to face the love of her life and slowly responded, "I would like you to personally write a letter to Chu Beijie himself."

Chu Beijie purposefully climbed up the steep steps leading to the palace.

He finally stopped, facing the King's personal palace, the pale light of the winter sun shining on his face and warming him yet he could not ignore a feeling of anguish in his heart.

There was no one present to disturb him, all the palace attends had withdrawn even Chu Zairan left. He was left standing in front of his brother's palace.

He had once shaken the mighty battlefields yet at this moment he feared opening the wooden doors before him.

His brother's illness had begun from the pain of losing his young sons.

By loving Bai Pingting, he betrayed his only brother.

The confrontation between the two had long begun, ever since the Queen had send assassins to wait near his residence. The two parties had been frozen in stalemate, all that was remaining was for them to make a move.

He had betrayed his brother, the brother who he had grown up idolising and the King he pledged his life to.

He could barely lift his feet, heavy from the burden in his heart.

Before he could reach out to push open the wooden doors, the it silently opened. Chu Beijie looked up into a familiar face which had lost its former radiance to grief, the cheeks shrunken and dark rings around the dim eyes.

"Sister in Law..."

The Queen stepped out, her face weary and assessed Chu Beijie for a moment before gifting him a heartwrenching smile. "The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned."

Her voice was calm and steady. The grief-stricken cries accompanying the deaths of the young princes that had shaken the Dong Lin's Royal Residence seemed almost like a lifetime ago.

Chu Beijie whose heart was heavy with turmoil replied, "I have returned."

The Queen steps were unsteady; she paused for a moment, closing her eyes to compose herself before quietly stating, "The King has been waiting for you, come." She assessed Chu Beijie for another moment before leaving.

Chu Beijie eyes followed her until she turned the corner and disappeared from his view. It was only then that he turned his gaze toward the partially opened door.

Taking a deep breath, he reached out and pushed open the heavy wooden doors.

Stepping inside the palace he felt as if he was slowly being swallowed up by the darkness. The dying King had become photophobic. Heavy curtains hung over the windows, blocking out all the sunlight. Upon closing the wooden doors, the room became dark as night.

The only light came from a single flickering candle.

To think that the dazzling and majestic palace had fallen into such a wretched state.

Chu Beijie moved towards the large, gold lacquered bed.

"Brother," He quietly called out, "I have returned."

"Returned?" The King had lost a lot of weight but his vigour remained. He stared almost desperately at his younger brother as if trying to memorise every inch of his face. After a long time, his eyes brightened with an older brother's pride and with a faint smile. "I have always known that one day you would return to my side."

He reached out and firmly grasped the hands long calloused by a lifetime of sword wielding, hands within with the same blood flowed.

"Brother, your illness..."

"Don't worry it's nothing major, my eyes have just become sensitive to light and my chest would just occasionally hurt a little. I'm currently taking medicine for it."

Chu Beijie could feel the strength in this brother's grip and his heart felt

lighter. Sitting at the King's bedside, he offered warm words of comfort, "My Brother, relax and look after your health. Although there are any soldiers threatening our borders, they are nothing compared to the might of Dong Lin's armies. When I return from the battlefields, I'm sure your health will be better and you can once again welcome me on the battlements as I return victorious." His words were filled with strength and conviction.

The King's eyes were filled with warmth and pride as he gazes at his younger brother.

His brother was driven by his heart, a trait which cannot be afforded for those burdened with the legacy of a nation.

"The enemy is merely lingering near our borders at the moment and have not made a declaration of war yet. If we were to attack by sending out our mighty Duke of Zhen-Bei, why, we would become a laughing stock to our neighbours. My Brother please stay at the palace for a few days."

Chu Beijie who had never neglected a battle before, gravely responded, "My Brother you mustn't overlook these allied troops; their commander is He Xia who has proven himself in battle many times. I believe that it would be better to deal with them immediately, please award me the military power and I shall deal with them at once."

The King knew that Chu Beijie took military matters extremely seriously and dealt with them with great care, picking up on even the minutest of flaws.

If the King was too earnest in trying to delay the war, he would inevitably rouse his suspicion.

As he thought about the deep feelings of trust they had for one another and his own plot to delay Beijie's departure, the King felt an almost overwhelming sense of bitterness. He nodded in agreement. "Brother you are right."

The King knew that Chu Beijie understood every general at the frontlines like the back of his hand and so any attempts to buy time using military matters would be unsuitable.

"General Linan currently has possession of the command flag. I have already asked him to return with it. Since he needs to travel back from the frontlines, he

should be back in two days at the latest. Once he returns I will hand you the flag and you can immediately depart with the troops.”

Upon hearing this Chu Beijie immediately began animatedly discussing battle tactics before suddenly declaring, “Brother, do not worry. I guarantee no army will step even an inch onto Dong Lin.”

As Chu Beijie stepped out of the King’s Royal Residence he was met by Chu Zairan who had been waiting outside. “I could hear the King’s laughter, ever since Duke’s return he has been filled with joy. Duke’s residence has been empty for a year now and will require some extensive cleaning, therefore I have arranged for you to stay at the palace. This is something that the citizens also hope for; they have longed for your return.”

Chu Zairan stopped at a building located in the centre of the palace and clapped, upon which more than a dozen guards and palace attendants appeared and greeted Chu Beijie.

Chu Zairan continued, “I personally ordered this building to be prepared for you, it’s both spacious, comfortable and connected to the plum blossom courtyard you favoured when younger.”

Chu Beijie’s sharp gaze quickly assessed the assigned palace guards, noting the lack of familiar faces. Remaining expressionless, he nodded, “I see.”

After bidding farewell to Chu Zairan, he stepped inside.

Chu Beijie grew up in the Dong Lin royal palace. It wasn’t until he was canonised as the Duke of Zhen-Bei that he moved out of the palace into his own residence.

A beautiful palace maid appeared and greeted him, “Duke has travelled far and must be tired. Please allow us to assist you in your bath.”

Her eyes were inviting, her voice gentle. Chu Beijie however remained indifferent.

“I have led countless armies and experienced many battlefields. I have never required any assistance bathing.” Chu Beijie dismissed the palace maid.

Even though he grew up in the palace as a prince, he was not pampered.

Instead he began his military duties in his teens and as a result of hard work, determination, temperament and some natural talent, he quickly rose up the ranks and became a national war hero.

After finally washing off the dust that had collected over the past few days of travelling, Chu Beijie felt refreshed and comfortable.

Despite his physical fatigue, Chu Beijie was nonetheless quite energised. Wearing some lightweight and casual clothes, he stood on the balcony and gazed at the plum blossom courtyard. He stood against the wind, clothes billowing and hair flying, confident and bold. The younger palace maids could only sigh, hearts pounding at the sight.

The plum blossoms were currently in full bloom, just like those back at his secluded estate a faint fragrance floating in the air.

However, the courtyard was missing something or rather someone. The setting would never compare with that secluded mountain estate.

On this trip back to the Royal Residence of Dong Lin, it seemed that the most familiar sights were the most distant. In the past, all his palace guards were handpicked. After a year, not a single familiar face remained. His sister-in-law treated him coldly, unable to forget his role in the death of her two sons. In a way it was all for the best. Since his Brother was ill, Chu Beijie needed only to prepare for the war and await the command flag.

Over the next few days Chu Beijie noticed there were no young soldiers, only elderly court officials. When he mentioned this Chu Zairan, he replied, "Currently all the younger soldiers are either stationed at the border or awaiting deployment at home."

As per Dong Lin military protocol, in the event of war, all soldiers must await orders at home so that their whereabouts are always known. Chu Beijie was unable to find any faults in Chu Zairan's explanation.

The image of Pingting leaning on the couch, her black hair spreading casually over the pillow, seemed to be imprinted at the back of his mind and would surface frequently.

"Pingting passed her birthday alone, so as for Duke's birthday, could we be

together?” Her face flushed and bearing a gentle and loving smile.

“I will try my hardest.”

Chu Beijie did not in fact promise Pingting anything, but he recalled her eyes alight with happiness. He secretly counted the days until his return.

Unknowingly as he awaited the return of the command flag, it was already his third night in the palace.

Chu Beijie’s patience was at an end when he finally received word from a court messenger. Jumping out of bed he muttered, “To think that someone would dare to delay military matter. When I meet him...”

Dressed in formal attire, Chu Beijie strode towards the King’s residence. On his way, he was interrupted by a kneeling servant, “Duke, please Concubine Li begs for an audience.”

Chu Beijie stopped, gripping the handle of his sword, he looked down at the palace maid. Under the moonlight, it was difficult to discern the features of the girl but she appeared to be young, only fifteen or perhaps sixteen. To think that she would dare to block his path.

“How did you know I would be here?” Chu Beijie’s gaze was cold.

Hearing his deadly tone, the maid was terrified and shaking uncontrollably. Nonetheless she explained, “Ever since Duke’s arrival at the palace, Concubine Li has asked me to wait here for you since you must walk along this past to get to the King’s residence. Since Duke is alone, I managed to pull up my courage and approach you.”

“I am currently busy and have no time for some concubine.” Chu Beijie spat out before continuing towards the King’s palace.

Despite her young age, the maid was extremely loyal to her mistress and grabbed Chu Beijie’s legs to stop him. “Duke, this matter is extremely important, more so than the military affair you dealing with. Please grant my mistress an audience.”

Chu Beijie had met countless different people in his life and was a good judge of character. Upon seeing the maid daring to meet his eyes, he sensed no

deception. However, once again he felt a very strange sense of unease, looking back at the King's residence he finally agreed with a gruff. "Lead the way."

The maid was surprised and stunned for a while before saying, "Yes." After standing up, she led Chu Beijie through a maze of courtyards and corridors.

In the dark, they walked along a long and winding path and headed towards the harem. Chu Beijie could vaguely recall this area of the palace. He used to come here and play as a child. Since he knew that his brother had absolute trust in him, Beijie followed the maid confidently.

The maid stopped in front of a newly built residence, which Beijie guessed probably housed the private quarters of his brother's concubines. However he had never heard of a Concubine Li before.

The maid looked back at Chu Beijie before stepping into the residence and quietly announcing, "Madam, the Duke of Zhen-Bei has arrived."

"Please come in." The woman inside appeared to have many worries, unable to fall asleep even in the late hours of the night. She sounded very relieved about Chu Beijie's arrival as if he could solve all of her problems.

Chu Beijie marched inside and quickly scanned the room.

A small charcoal stove was lit near the centre of room, providing some comforting warmth. A beautiful young woman sat towards the back of the room. Upon seeing Chu Beijie, she smiled, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, since it would be difficult for me, I unable to offer a formal greeting. Please indulge me." The woman gently rubbed her protruding belly as she spoke.

Chu Beijie finally understood why that maid had the courage to drag him here.

He sat down without a word and assessed Concubine Li. After a moment he finally announced, "I am very busy so if Madam have anything to say to me please do so."

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei's demeanour is as they say, confident and direct." Concubine Li began, her hand sweeping her hair behind an ear and frowning as if uncertain as to how she should continue before carefully choosing her next words, "I was canonised 7 months ago, as to the reason I'm sure you already know," she said as she gazed lovingly at her bump.

“To give birth to the King’s child is the greatest honour for a woman in the harem. I was blessed with this honour and my greatest desire is to safely give birth to this child. However living here in the harem, I have begun to fear for my life and the life of this child. Ever since I heard of your return I have waited to see you. Duke, you are the pillar of Dong Lin, our support and protector, please help me protect my unborn child so that I may safely give birth.”

Chu Beijie was rather surprised and asked “Who on earth would dare to harm a woman pregnant with the King’s child? If you say you are so terrified, why don’t you just tell the King about your concerns?”

“The King is very ill, I have not seen him in many months now.”

“Who would dare harm you?”

Concubine Li looked down and remained wordless.

Chu Beijie came to a realisation, “The Queen?”

“Hahaha...” Seeing Xoncubine Li nod her head in answer, Chu Beijie burst out in laughter before glaring at her and coldly responding, “What type of person do you think my sister-in-law is? If she does not like you, you would not have the luxury of speaking to me here today. I am very busy today and I can’t be bothered dealing with your nonsense so I will let this one time slip. Never send people to block my path again.” Following this warning, Beijie turned to leave.

As he stepped out of the room, Concubine Li quietly whispered, “It’s because of Bai Pingting.”

At this Chu Beijie suddenly stopped in his tracks. He turned around and pierced her with a sharp gaze.

“What did you just say?”

“At first the Queen was overjoyed over my pregnancy, even more so than the King since there would be an heir. The Queen would constantly visit me and care for me, almost like the older sister I’ve always wished for. However in the past few days, she has become very cold to me. I can see hatred in her eyes. I fear for the life of my child.” She sighed, “This is all because of Pingting.”

Chu Beijie walked back into the room and stared at Concubine Li trying to find

any signs of deceit before finally asking, “What on earth does Pingting have to do with all of this?”

“I don’t know who told the Queen about my connection to Pingting.” Concubine Li said with a bitter smile, “When Pingting poisoned the two princes, the King lost his heirs. My unborn child is his last and yet the child is connected to Pingting. If you were the Queen, how would the Duke of Zhen-Bei feel in this situation?”

“You know Pingting?” Chu Beijie squinted his eyes at her, assessing.

Concubine Li sighed before looking up at Chu Beijie and explaining in a defeated tone, “I met Pingting back in Gui Le at court. After the signing of the 5 year peace treaty, the King of Gui Le gifted me to the King of Dong Lin. I grew up in the Royal Residence, so how could I not know the famous Bai Pingting?”

Chu Beijie stared into Concubine Li’s eyes, assessing the truthfulness of her claim.

If the Queen believed that Concubine Li and Pingting had a connection, then the unborn child was in grave danger.

“Duke, for the sake of this child, I beg of you to stay in the palace for a few more days. I fear the Queen will harm us. I will be giving birth very soon, can Duke not spare just a few days?” Concubine Li placed her hands protectively over her unborn child and broke down in tears.

Chu Beijie felt torn and sighed.

Should the Imperial Concubine Li be pregnant with a son, he would become the future King of Dong Lin.

Dong Lin had already lost two princes. If they were not careful, they may well lose their final hope.

That morning, the King received the requested command flag from General Linan and as agreed the King handed it over to Chu Beijie.

“Brother, preparations are complete, you can depart whenever you desire.” Perhaps it is due to the joy of reuniting with family but the King’s health improved greatly.

Chu Beijie hesitantly accepted the command flag. He never once hesitated over anything before. What is the correct decision? After what seemed like eternity, he turned to the King and said, “Brother, I still have some things to do so I would like to stay in the palace for a few more days.”

It is already the fourth day since arriving at the capital.

In just six days it would be his birthday.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 32

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch32

The secluded mountain residence was very peaceful.

The guards stood outside whilst the young maids worked inside, looks were exchanged as familiar faces greeted one another with occasional encounters. Love was in the air.

Hongqiang upon noting that Zuiju was accompanying Pingting, smiled as she slipped outside to play. Pingting and Zuiju did not mind.

There was little snowfall these days, and the sun shone brightly. Its warm rays melted the thin layer of ice and snow on the ground. Zuiju was always worried about Pingting slipping hence insisted on accompanying her every time she went for a walk.

“Please take care, the ground is slippery.”

Pingting stood beneath the plum blossom tree, stretching to pluck the buds. She laughed, “Every single time I take a step you keep reminding me. If you’re that worried, you may as well help me then.”

Helpless, Zuiju could only move to help Pingting with her task by pulling down the plum tree branches, allowing her to pluck the buds.

“Didn’t you wish to display these in your room?”

“No,” Pingting mischievously replied, revealing a cheeky smile, “for cooking.”

“Cooking?”

She could just imagine the fragrant smell of crane boiled in a mixture of herbs and plum blossom buds.

Pingting cheerfully placed the flower buds and blossoms into a small dish as she began, “I suddenly recall reading in an old text about the medical properties of plum blossoms. I plan to add these buds together with some sugar, salt, wine and winter vegetables and make some preserves in the traditional Gui Le style. When the Duke returns, we can enjoy some together.”

Zuiju quickly reminded, “I have never heard of the idea of using plum blossoms in medicine, so I have no idea of its effects. It should be fine for the Duke to try some but you must take care.”

“I know”, Pingting replied, “Haven’t I followed your nutritional guidelines?”

Realising how far her thoughts had wandered and the truth in Zuiju’s words, Pingting cheeks darkened in embarrassment.

“It’s such a shame that it’s winter, there are very few flowers in bloom. Once Spring and Summer arrive there will be many more to choose from and we can make so many dishes. For example, there are more than five ways of cooking to cook a peony.” Pingting continued whilst picking more buds. After a while however she began to feel a bit tired. Since she was currently pregnant with Chu Beijie’s child, she must never risk overexerting herself. Pingting handed her plate to Zuiju, and the two of them returned to Pingting’s quarters.

“It’s sunset already.” Pingting remarked, “The Duke should have received the command flag by now.”

She was only half correct.

Chu Beijie had long received the command flag but he had still yet to depart.

Chu Beijie was guarding Concubine Li’s residence. On the outside he looked calm and collected as always, inside he was very anxious.

On the dawning of the fifth day, he had already missed his planned departure date.

He wondered how Pingting was coping. She was eager to celebrate his birthday together. He feared how greatly she would be hurt by his broken promise.

He wouldn’t be able to bear it if he caused that utterly desolate look to appear

in her eyes again.

“Will Duke keep me company? It will snow tomorrow. Please allow me to play some music for you to appreciate the snowfall.”

She had already been disappointed by him once before.

Yet she would be disappointed once more.

His Brother, his Sister-in-Law, Concubine Li, Chu Zairan and all of the citizens would never understand the way her music, her voice, her slender fingers, her pale red lips and her elegant composure haunted his every thought. He longed for her presence.

The palace was grand but empty. There was fine food and great beauties yet no cure for this feeling of longing.

“I will try my best.”

He longed to wrap his arms around her delicate frame and admire the blossoming Spring and the waxing autumn moon together with her to travel to the very ends of the world with her, admiring nature’s gifts and never to be parted. He would protect her, never allowing the slightest harm to befall her or allow her to feel any pain.

Yet he was faced with a dilemma. It was a decision that would make or break his very country. How could he possibly choose a woman over the peace and prosperity of his very people, even if she was the only woman he would ever love? Birthdays come and go each year without fail. As for the bloodline of the Dong Lin King...this was the final ray of hope.

Little did he know, the messengers Chu Beijie sent out to Pingting had in fact been intercepted by the Queen.

The Queen’s face was pale with shock as she slowly stepped into the King’s residence and greeted the King. She waved for the palace attendants to leave.

“My Queen, why do you look so pale?” Asked the King once they were alone, “Hasn’t my Brother stayed back?”

The Queen’s head was decorated with a pearl phoenix ornament. With a stiffly straight back she slowly sat down as if she had a world of troubles and no idea

where to start.

After finally calming down her pounding heart, the Queen retrieved a letter from her belt and placed it before the King and said with a raspy voice, “This was just intercepted, the receiver is the Duke of Zhen-Bei, I believe King will find the identity of the sender quite shocking.”

The King picked up the letter and glanced at it before exclaiming, “Bei Mo’s General Ze Yin?” The Queen appeared very anxious. Biting her lip, she stammered out, “The contents are very shocking, King.”

It was a very long letter but the King dared not to dismiss any word. He carefully read the contents before finally ending up at the final line – the mastermind behind this was He Xia. The final words kept reverberating in his mind, mocking him. After a while he finally let out a long breath and looked up at his Queen’s pained expression. “What does my Queen think of this?”

“I have already ordered for people to confirm the identity of the sender; this is indeed Ze Yin’s handwriting. This seal is also his personal seal; there is no mistake.”

“Ze Yin shouldn’t have any connection with my Brother so why would he send a letter to him?”

“No matter what, Ze Yin has no need to lie in his letter. Revealing the plot between He Xia and the King of Bei Mo, puts himself in a position of unnecessary danger.” The Queen’s eyes were watery as she gazed at the King. She shutted her eyes as if they would shield her from this reality. He painfully cried out, “He Xia...my poor children, it was He Xia...”

Unable to hold back the pain, the Queen cried against the King’s shoulder.

With a pained expression in his eyes, the King slowly rubbed the Queen’s back to comfort her. “If this is true, then Bai Pingting wasn’t the culprit. Does my Brother know of this?”

The Queen sobbed and shook her head. After finally getting a hold of her emotions, she finally asked, “If Bai Pingting isn’t the murderer, then what should we do after the plan for He Xia to kidnap her?”

The King remained silent.

He stood up, a troubled expression pasted on his face. He turned away from the Queen and solemnly stated, “Bai Pingting is not the culprit, but that is an entirely different issue from the situation at hand. We are doing this for the lives of countless soldiers; we must hand her over to He Xia. As members of the royal family of Dong Lin, we must above all do what is necessary for our people regardless of personal desires.”

The Queen stared at her husband’s back with deep respect in her eyes. Those strong shoulders bear the weight of the entire nation.

“I understand,” she nodded, “Regardless of whether Bai Pingting is innocent or guilty, we must resolve the issue with the army pressing against our borders. He Xia’s troops should reach the Beijie’s secluded residence by nightfall tomorrow. He’s been focused on protecting Concubine Li’s unborn child. We must ensure he does not leave.”

Upon realising that they must bargain with the man who murdered her children, the Queen felt a wave of disgust. Yet as the Queen, as the mother of her nation, how could she put her feelings above her duty?

“By the way, concerning Concubine Li,” the King began with furrowed brow, “last night the imperial doctor reported that she received a shock and that the baby’s condition is a little...”

The Queen was noticeably startled by this. In order to keep Chu Beijie in the palace she arranged for Concubine Li to be threatened and sent servants to advise her to plead help from him.

As long as Concubine Li was unaware of what was truly going on, she would be able to truthfully trick Chu Beijie into staying. Without such a serious situation, once the issue regarding the potential heir to the throne has been resolved, there would be no way to keep Chu Beijie away from Bai Pingting.

Concubine Li’s baby is the only remaining child of the King. If something were to go amiss ...What could they do?

“The baby’s condition is amiss? Please do not worry King. The baby is the continuation of your legacy and that of our ancestors; they will definitely be protecting him from above in the heavens. I will go and check...”

A sudden flurry of footsteps interrupted the Queen's words.

"K-K-K...King!" Concubine Li's personal maid stumbled into the room and knelt before him, her breathing heavy and stammered out, "Concubine Li's baby, the fetus has moved, she will be giving birth soon!"

The Queen hesitated before stepping forward and addressing the maid, "Why is this happening so early? At the last health check, the doctor said she should have another 7 to 8 days before delivery?"

The maid peered at the Queen and recalled how her mistress may have actually been harmed by the Queen and bowed her head replying, "I do not know. Concubine Li was sitting calmly in the building atrium before suddenly crying out that her stomach hurt. She fell screaming in pain. I was so frightened by this I had no idea what to do."

The Queen felt no emotional attachment to Concubine Li, but her unborn child was of utmost important. Her husband was a wise and just ruler. How could his line end with him? Upon hearing the maid's words, she felt panicked and shouted, "What is the doctor doing? Has he arrived yet?"

The maid stuttered out "Al...already sent for."

"King!"

The King's eyes also revealed his internal panic, but he maintained a strong façade and grasped the Queen's hand comfortingly, "My Queen, do not fear. Concubine Li's body has been healthy and strong. Besides, delivering 7 to 8 days early is not an uncommon thing."

With the Queen, he rushed towards Concubine Li's residence.

There was chaos outside the building as maids and several elderly midwives rushed about.

"Hot water! Hurry up and bring hot water!"

"Clean towels!"

"Ginseng soup! Quickly, go and bring me the ginseng soup!" The attendants hurried about.

"Ahhhh! Ahhhhh! No! Ahhh, King...!" Concubine Li's pained cries became

louder and louder, overpowering the panicked voices of the countless midwives.

Chu Beijie was upholding his promise and stood outside the residence with sword in hand, awaiting the birth of the child. Upon seeing the King and Queen he bowed and greeted them, "Brother, Sister in law."

The King arrived leading his entourage and addressed the imperial doctor, "What is their condition?"

"King, I'm afraid Concubine Li has been restless and unable to eat or sleep properly these past few days. It has affected the baby." The imperial doctor's forehead was drenched in sweat, "I fear that she will be giving birth early."

"Ahhhhh! Ahhhhh!" Concubine Li's cries pierced the room.

The doctor immediately rushed inside again.

The King stood facing the door and spoke out, "My beloved please do not fear; I am here for you. The doctor has said that the baby is healthy, everything will be alright soon."

Concubine Li's screams continued to pierce the room, unaffected by the King's attempt to comfort her.

"King, what shall we do?" The Queen quietly asked unable to hide the panic in her eyes. By using Concubine Li in her scheme, she didn't consider the possibility of harming the baby.

If anything happened to the child, death would be her only means of apology.

Chu Beijie stood to the side and examined the King and Queen's expression, feeling a little suspicious.

Although the Queen was panicked, she still maintained some control over her senses. Noticing the look in Chu Beijie's eyes, she quickly composed herself. The King also noticed and exchanged a glance with the Queen. They could feel each other's unease.

They were originally counting on Concubine Li giving birth in another 7 to 8 days which would be more than enough to ensure that Bai Pingting would fall into He Xia's hands thus guaranteeing the retreat of the pressing armies.

With this sudden event, the time they would be able to delay Chu Beijie's

return was significantly shortened.

In addition to all this, Chu Beijie was anything but a fool. With his astute senses, even the best of plots would be unravelled by him eventually.

The Queen forced herself to remain calm. By now, there was little more they could do. The most important thing was to ensure the safe delivery of the child, and so she stood beside the King and awaited the news.

Not far in the forest, a flock of birds were shocked into flight.

Pingting suddenly opened her eyes and sat up in bed.

The full moon hung high up in the sky, its pale light reflecting off the thin layer of ice and snow. The stars were hidden this night.

“Miss?” Zuiju had been sleeping in Pingting’s room to keep her company. Rubbing her eyes and putting on a cloak, she got out of her bed and walked toward Pingting. “Are you thirsty?”

Pingting shook her head.

The moonlight lit up her delicate face and shrouded it in an air of sorrow.

“The birds have been shocked into flight. There are people heading up the mountain.”

Zuiju looked out the window towards the forest. In the darkness she could not make out much, “Perhaps it’s the woodcutter?”

“What would a woodcutter be doing out there this late at night? In the darkness, the wild animals must be hungry and roaming. No, he would go out in the day.” Pingting looked down in deep in thought. After a while her eyes flickered as if with some realisation. “Find me Moran.”

Zuiju nodded and opened the door to order the night maid waiting outside.

Moran arrived not long after, his clothes were neat and tidy and not a hair was out of place. He looked nothing like something who had just been roused from bed. Stepping into the room he looked toward Pingting and asked, “Is there anything I can do for you Miss Bai?”

“It’s already quite late, why are you not resting?” Pingting assessed him, “Has

something happened?”

Moran replied, “As the commander of the guards, I make my rounds at this hour every night. A while ago a flock of birds were shocked into flight. I ordered a few of the guards to investigate; everything should be fine but it is better to be cautious.” With a sudden change in expression he asked, “Was Miss Bai awoken by the birds?”

Upon hearing that he had already sent guards to investigate, Pingting appeared noticeably calmer and nodded, “I have accompanied armies to battle before. In the dead of night, the sudden flight of birds usually indicates enclosing enemy soldiers.”

Moran revealed a smile and nodded, “Indeed. After spending years in the army, hearing the sound of birds inevitably puts one on guard. Miss Bai need not worry. Myself and the guards will look after this matter. The night wind is chilly; you should rest soon.”

With more tasks awaiting him, he offered a few words of comfort and departed.

Zuiju yawned and tiredly said, “You heard from Moran himself; everything is fine. He is looking after the matter. The night wind is chilly, may I close the window now?”

Pingting had always been a light sleeper, after this commotion she was unable to fall back asleep. She felt full of spirit and so was understandably unwilling to lie back down. “The winter full moon is so beautiful, shining down on the glittering snow like a quilt. It will not be cold.”

Zuiju shook her head at Pingting’s stubbornness. Knowing that there was no way she could possibly convince her to sleep, she sighed, “You’re usually so mature. Where is this sudden burst of childishness coming from?” Crawling under the covers next to Pingting, she also looked up at the moon.

“The Duke should be back soon right?” Staring at the moon, Pingting softly asked with a tender look in her eyes.

Zuiju giggled at this and gleefully said, “I just knew you would say that. I bet you have been thinking about it constantly.” Moving to hold Pingting’s wrist and

check her pulse she sighed, "Love is such an interesting thing. The Duke is such a feared and admired man yet you are a calm and easy going person. After encountering love, you have both become so foolish at times."

Pingting turned to look at Zuiju, "Sure, laugh at me now. Love is something you won't understand until you encounter it." Turning away to gaze into the moonlit night again, she whispered tenderly, "Such a beautiful moon. If I could sit on the snow covered ground and play the zither accompanied by its gentle rays, it would be so perfect."

Zuiju immediately stopped her train of thought, "Don't ever think about it. It's such a cold night. If you sit out in the snow playing the qin, you might get sick again. You finally got better after taking medicine for so long. Are you really going to risk it?"

Pingting understood that she was right and said nothing more.

Although it was nice to play music by moonlight, the desired listener was not present.

Silently admiring the snow covered ground, Pingting suddenly recalled that day in the Hua Residence when Chu Beijie first visited to request a song. Granted one, he then asked for another.

At the time she had no idea who Chu Beijie was but already guessed that he was using an alias . "Mister wanted a piece from me so I did you a favour. Of course you should use your real name."

"Does My Lady not want anything?" Chu Beijie asked.

"What do I want?"

"What My Lady wants is naturally a music critic."

The sound of his pleasant laugh, full of confidence and ease, echoed in her mind.

So determined as if nothing in the world could bring him down.

Looking back she realised that she has not forgotten a single word or act by Chu Beijie from that day. She could recall every second together vividly.

She never would have thought that things would unfold to bring them to this

day.

If this were a gift from the gods, then they would indeed be generous. She had a tiny child inside of her, growing with each passing day, quietly sleeping in her womb.

The first pregnancy is always the hardest, in another two months it will become clear that another life is growing inside of her.

Pingting caressed her lower abdomen, it is still flat and the warmth spreads from her fingertips to her heart as if that tiny life inside of her was already protecting her like his father.

She turned around and whispered, "Zuiju, thank you."

"For what?"

"Thank you for allowing me to personally tell the Duke this news." Her gaze was tender and full of dreams, "It will no doubt be the happiest moment of my life."

Pingting looked out the window towards the east. It is calm. The tall trees formed a wall, blocking her sight.

That is the direction from which Chu Beijie would be returning.

The sky was slowly lightening.

A baby's cries interrupted the tension in the room, faint but creeping through the gap in the door. The sound made its mark on everyone's hearts.

The Dong Ling King jumped up from his seat.

"The child is born?"

The doctor ran out of the room, his face pale with fatigue, and immediately kowtowed to the King and Queen announcing, "Congratulations, both mother and child are well."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" The Queen interrupted.

All eyes were focussed on the imperial doctor's mouth.

"Dear Queen, it is a beautiful little princess."

The faces of nearly everyone present darkened.

Not a prince.

Dong Lin remained without a crown prince.

The doctor understood that it was not the anticipated news and so sneaking a look at the King quietly continued, “Concubine Li and the baby are well, would King like to see them?”

“Yes.” The King nodded, relaxing his furrowed brow “It has been hard on Concubine Li.” He then turned his gaze onto his younger brother.

“Congratulations Brother,” Chu Beijie walked over and bowed before continuing, “The war is still looming. There is no time to waste; I have received the command flag and shall now head to the frontlines. Once I return victorious we can have some celebratory drinks together.”

The King was noticeably startled by this but quickly collected himself, “Brother there is no need to be so hasty. For such an important battle you should at least allow me to send you off at the city entrance.”

Chu Beijie gravely replied, “Military matters are of utmost importance. There is no luxury for grand motions at this moment.” Although he was speaking to the King, Beijie’s eyes were assessing the Queen’s every expression.

The Queen felt uneasy but managed to maintain a façade of calm and addressed the King, “King, Chu Beijie’s words are not without merit. Military matters are of utmost importance. He has already stayed in the palace for several days now. I’m sure the soldiers are awaiting his command.”

The King exchanged a quick glance with the Queen and nodded, “Then let you be off brother. Stay safe. I will await your triumphant return so we may celebrate together.”

Chu Beijie hummed in agreement. He turned and left his footsteps loud and heavy.

After his figure finally disappeared in the distance, the Queen gestured for the newly appointed captain of the guard. “Immediately block off Zhao Qing Residence. Do as I previously ordered.”

“Queen, everything has been prepared as ordered. The arrows have been exchanged for practice unsharpened ones. These will only penetrate a maximum of half an inch. None of the guards on duty have been trained by the Duke before.”

“Good.” The Queen nodded before looking up at the King, her eyes shining with determination, “Go then.”

“Yes!”

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 33

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch33

The sky was lightening, the northerly winds were blowing and the sun was finally rising out from behind the clouds bringing warmth with its rays.

The first thing Pingting did that morning was process the pot of plum blossoms she had picked, adding wine, sugar, salt and winter vegetables. After much work she suddenly stopped, “Maybe we should also add some vanilla.”

“I’ll go get some.” Hongqiang excitedly grabbed some before staring at the pot and admiring, “This looks so nice must taste delicious. Are you preparing this for the Duke’s return?”

Zuiju easily guessed what Hongqiang was hinting at and glanced at her teasing, “I’m sure when it’s ready you’ll get to have a taste.”

Hongqiang clapped her hands a few times, ecstatic before asking, “Is there anything I can help with?”

Pingting had spent the night gazing at the moon and felt her spirit nourished. She happily made her requests, “Go and find a nice spot in the courtyard, clear away the snow and dig a small pit. Snow covered soil retains a light and refreshing fragrance. We’ll bury the pot in the snow and smoke it for half an hour allowing the fragrance to seep into the pot. When the Duke returns we can open up this pot of ‘Locked Away Goodies’.”

Zuiju tutted, “Locked Away Goodies? What an interesting name, very thoughtfully chosen, makes me excited to see how it tastes.”

Pingting glared at her teasing but couldn’t hide her faint look of embarrassment and smiled, causing Zuiju’s eyes to light up.

Hongqiang picked the broom and went outside in search of a suitable place.

Pingting picked up the pot which was unexpectedly heavy. Losing her centre of balance, she staggered a bit, giving Zuiju a fright as she hurriedly took over carrying the pot. "Please, no more of this, sooner or later you'll give me a heart attack or something."

Zuiju then carried the pot outside.

Hongqiang had long picked a spot and swept away the snow. She was currently digging a pit but having a lot of trouble doing so.

"Let me have a go." Zuiju pulled up her sleeves and picked up the shovel. After working up a sweat, she too was unable to dig up much and spat out, "This ground is so annoying. It's hard like stone."

Pingting was amused from watching their attempts. Upon hearing Zuiju complaints, Pingting couldn't hold back her laughter any longer. "You simply aren't used to manual labour. The winter the ground greatly harden so we won't be able to dig it up. It'll be much easier to ask one of the guards to come and help."

"That's easy. I'll go find someone to help." Hongqiang was on good terms with the guards so she could easily find assistance.

As she turned away, Zuiju tugged on the back of her clothes to hold her back, "No need to look for anyone. Help delivered itself."

The three of them looked towards the doorway and discovered a person walking towards them. From afar, the figure looked like Moran.

"Oh, General Chu..." Hongqiang began but seeing his expression, she swallowed back the rest of her words.

It was indeed Moran.

He was wearing the same clothes as last night, his sword at his hip. Not a hair was out of place. His facial expression however betrayed him.

Even the news of pressing enemy troops would not warrant such an expression.

Seeing his facial expression, Pingting and Zuiju's smiles froze.

After a long moment Pingting finally asked, “What’s wrong?”

Moran’s calm demeanour hid the true extent of his inner turmoil. Taking a deep breath, he began with an even but quiet voice to avoid shocking Pingting, “The situation has changed, we should not stay here for much longer. Please follow me.”

Turning around and proceeding a few paces he realised that Pingting had made no move to follow and frowned, “There is no time to waste, please make haste.”

Pingting stood unmoving, the north wind bit into her skin. Rubbing her hands for warmth, she finally said, “Follow me.” before turning and walking inside.

Seeing her calm expression, Moran couldn’t help but feel surprised for a moment. He hesitated before following.

Zuiju and Hongqiang could feel tension in the atmosphere, however they were not aware of the true seriousness of their situation. Knowing that Pingting was discussing the matter privately with Moran, Zuiju tugged on Hongqiang’s sleeve. The two carried the unburied pot inside, trying to remain calm as they waited.

Pingting stepped into the room and sat down. Her eyes fluttered as she otherwise sat unmoving in contemplation. After a long while, she picked up the cup of tea in front of her. Holding it up to her lips, she realised it was already cold and placed it back onto the table before softly asking Moran, “Are they sent by the Queen?”

Moran was surprised once more.

Chu Beijie wouldn’t have told her about the Queen’s troops lurking nearby.

He looked at Pingting.

Pingting laughed somewhat harshly, “It really isn’t that hard to imagine. That depth of hatred she has for me...The Duke would not allow me step a foot outside the walls of this residence and left all of his guards behind, even you. In the entirety of Dong Lin, who else would dare to oppose him and loathe me deeply enough to do so? Just tell me how grave the situation is.”

With her final sentence, any remaining languidness disappeared. Her eyes

shined with intelligence and calculation, reminding him she was once the commander that saved Bei Mo from annihilation.

Moran stared at the delicate face before him before confessing, “As dire as can be. Last night I sent out 10 guards into the forest on a reconnaissance mission. None of them returned. This morning I sent out a few more to try and locate the Queen’s troops and record their movements...”

“The guards have not returned,” Pingting interrupted before sighing and continuing, “If that is the case, I’m afraid the mountain is already completely surrounded. Does the Queen truly have so many troops?”

“Miss Bai, there is little time to waste, please come with me to the back of the mountain.” Moran began, “The Duke built a hidden base there in case of emergencies. It is difficult to locate, this residence is no longer safe.”

Pingting looked at him, “We only have one team of guards, even if we include you we cannot defend against the troops surrounding us. The final result is very clear. Why have they not made a move yet?”

Moran thought for a moment before suddenly looking up and asking almost disbelievingly, “Could they have already discovered the location of the hidden base? Are they simply waiting to catch us on our way there?”

To think of the opponent’s might, with troops far outnumbering them, what else is there to do? The feeling of hopelessness was difficult to keep at bay.

Pingting did not answer, instead she pulled open the curtains and looked out assessing the time of day before suddenly asking, “How many messenger pigeons do we have?”

“Fifteen in total, why?” Moran asked.

“Release them all, send them off in all directions.”

Her voice was soft and calm but filled with charisma. Moran obeyed without hesitation, “Yes I will do so immediately.”

Zuiju entered upon seeing Moran’s hurried departure. She carried a fresh pot of tea and looked at Pingting, staring up at the sky by the door. They’ve been so busy preparing the plum blossoms for pickling this morning that Pingting’s hair

was not pinned up. Instead, the ebony strands fell loosely, framing the distant and mournful expression on her face. Her expression frightened Zuiju somewhat. She softly touched her arm, “Miss Bai?”

Pingting was pulled back to the present and looked at her, “It’s you?” Laughing somewhat sadly, she continued, “It’s as if as long as we’re alive, there will be no peace. It seems so pointless. It’s cold outside. Come in and let us drink some tea to warm ourselves.”

Zuiju carried the tea inside and poured a cup for Pingting and herself. Cradling the cup to warm her hands, she studied Pingting’s expression. After a long while she said, “No matter what happens, Moran will take care of it. This is still the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s territory; who would dare do anything here?”

Pingting knew Zuiju was quick-witted and a talented physician but nonetheless still a young girl. She gently replied, “It’s precisely knowing this is the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s territory that I’m worried. Who else who dare to do so, other than someone whose power rivals the Duke? Even the Duke’s departure must have been within their calculations. I’m afraid...” Pingting looked down at her current flat stomach, her hands covering it protectively. Her eyes drifted towards Zuiju.

Zuiju was slightly startled by her piercing gaze and stiffly replied, “I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t even tell the Duke. Who else could I tell?”

Pingting nodded and sighed, “I hope things are not as bad as I have predicted.”

The hanging screen was quickly raised, and the cold wind followed Moran into the room.

The two looked up and noticed Moran’s expression was worse than before.

“The pigeons did not fly far before they were all shot down.” Moran said with great difficulty, “All fifteen of them, not one survived. The residence is completely and thoroughly surrounded.”

It was only then that Zuiju understood the scope of what was happening. She released a scream, her eyes widening.

Moran thought for a moment before speaking through gritted teeth, “Would Miss Bai please give me the sword the Duke left to you? I will send some guards to fight their way out. An army base is located about 20 miles south. Once the

general sees the sword, he will immediately send out rescue troops.”

Pingting tilted her head and gazed at the sword hanging on the wall.

Chu Beijie had left that behind for her.

His hands had been warm as they held hers. “I leave Moran and the guards here to protect you. If the unthinkable happens here, send someone by a fast horse with this sword to the Dragon Tiger Barracks twenty miles north of here, and ask General Chen Mu to help. He recognises my sword.”

His words rang in her ears.

That jewel encrusted sword that once slayed countless enemies hung silently on the wall.

Pingting didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Chu Beijie had planned everything out so well, thinking of all possibilities except this one.

Who could blame him? No one could have ever guessed that things would progress to this stage.

Pingting walked over and slowly took down the sword, caressing the hilt.

Knowing that there was no time to waste and seeing her dismay, Moran could only say, “Only this sword can represent the Duke and muster the troops. After the rescue troops arrive, it will be returned immediately.”

Stepping forward and he reached for the sword, only for Pingting move away.

Pingting always considered the overall picture rather than acting on selfish whims, but at this critical moment, why was she having second thoughts?

Facing a formidable enemy, every second was crucial. Recalling the numerous soldiers bound to be surrounding them his heart sank.

With her arms wrapped tightly around the sword, Pingting sat down again. She looked up at Moran, a slightly haunted look in her eyes, and softly asked, “With the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s residence so heavily surrounded, do you really think the King is unaware of it?”

Moran was evidently shaken and paled upon realisation.

Not on the Queen's secret orders?

But on the King's instead?

If the King himself was also playing a role in this, would there be any hope left?

Pingting continued, "Sealing the paths traversing the mountain is not a simple task yet we knew nothing. This is because we were long surrounded, and they did not wish for us to know. As for the civilians living nearby and the army camp 20 miles south, how could they be unaware?"

Moran could not utter a word in response.

To be honest there was no need for him to answer these two questions.

Like a fog lifting, everything was coming together and becoming clear.

Chu Beijie had prepared for every possibility, guarding against enemies and his sister-in-law, yet never did he ever consider the thought of needing to guard against his own beloved brother, the dignified and good King of Dong Lin.

Hearts were forever tied through blood.

The Brother that should have known him best, the Brother who should most clearly understand how much Pingting meant to him.

Zuiju realised she had been holding her breath.

Pingting looked down at the sword resting next to her pounding heart. She could almost feel Beijie's warmth clinging to the cold metal.

"The army camp would either have moved by now, or the General was replaced. There will be no help." Pingting looked out the window before suddenly asking, "What is the date today?"

Zuiju quietly answered, "It is the fourth."

The sun moved the sky, it was already noon.

"The fourth?" Smiling, Pingting's gaze was filled with warmth and longing, "Then there are just two more days." Turning to look at Moran she began, "I want a topographic map of this area and all the details available the number of guards, their level of skill, our food and water source. That includes the hunting and woodcutting patterns of the locals..."

After giving out all of her commands, Pingting took a deep, contented breath before coldly saying, “Having the target heavily surrounded yet making not move. It seems they want to lure us into surrendering. This is not a characteristic of the King of Dong Lin but of someone very familiar. Who could it be?” Pingting pondered the question, her brows furrowed. Her gaze however gradually became more firm and steady.

The capital of Dong Lin.

The sun’s rays pierced through the darkness, shrouding the world with light and warmth. Despite the sunlight shining upon the palace, there was an unrelenting sense of gloom.

The King and Queen stepped inside Concubine Li’s residence and gently comforted the weak and pale faced concubine. The palace maids immediately brought over the baby princess, swaddled in white silk. She was presented to the King and Queen.

“She looks just like King.” The Queen whispered.

The King’s brows were furrowed. Looking at his newborn daughter, he forced a smile. The corners of his lips were still uplifted when clashing weapons sounded outside.

“King, please take care!” The sound of weapons was piercing. The King’s personal guards exchanged a look and realized the turning tide of battle outside. Four of them moved to protect the King and Queen. Unsheathing their swords, they stood in front, vigilant of their surroundings. The remaining two guards hid positioned themselves at the window to track the enemy.

Pained cries were followed by heavy thudding sounds. The ruckus reached the room, waking the baby princess who began crying.

The sound of clashing weapons suddenly stopped, but the silence was anything other than settling.

A gleam passed through the King’s eyes. He suddenly stood up and pushed open the door to stand at the top of the stairs.

Chu Beijie’s calm figure entered his sight.

The fighting was over.

The courtyard was marked by streaks of blood, injured guards staggered with gritted teeth. They refused to utter a sound despite the pain.

The few uninjured guards tightly gripped their pikes as they surrounded Chu Beijie, but none of them dared to challenge him.

Chu Beijie stood in the middle of the courtyard, looking down at the sword in his hand. Blood slowly dripped from the tip and fell like tears upon the smooth pavement.

His expression was eerily calm, evidently unconcerned about the guards surrounding him.

Not even the greatest of armies could hold him back.

Perhaps that would indeed be the case.

The coldness in his demeanour evoked a shiver.

Everyone stared at the mighty and lauded Duke of Zhen-Bei. Unblinking and holding their breaths, they dared not to make even a single move.

When the final drop of blood fell from his sword, Chu Beijie looked up at his brother. With a pained and almost haunted look in his eyes, he finally asked, "Why?"

His voice was soft, yet no one could mistake the threat it carried.

Covered in blood but stubbornly refusing to give in to pain lied the captain of the guards, tasked with stopping Chu Beijie earlier.

The Queen was shaken by his sharp gaze. She opened her mouth to answer but felt the King grasp her wrist. She lowered her eyes, standing silently beside the King.

"I was careless." The King stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at his only younger brother and sighed, "After commanding the army for so many years, you have always kept the command flag on you at all times. Of course you wouldn't need to go back to your quarters to retrieve it. Beijie, must you really waste all that I have done for you?"

Chu Beijie simply stared at him and asked once more, "Why?"

It was long past the point of no return.

“Because you are my only brother. You are Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei.” The King’s voice rose as he spoke, becoming more assured, “It is unlikely that I will have a son. One day all of this will be yours. This country will be yours along with its countless people and the brave soldiers who guard our borders. Everything will be yours.”

The words resounded.

Chu Beijie was unmoved. Standing tall, he stared at the King. The monarch’s eyes were momentarily full of regret before becoming stricken with torment and sorrow.

“In the face of a war, as a member of the Royal House, the safety of our nation should be our priority. Brother, you tried absolutely everything to delay my departure. Are you not concerned about the situation at the frontlines?” Chu Beijie speculated before shaking his head, “No, that’s not it.” His expression darkened, “You wanted to stop me from returning to the residence.”

A small isolated residence, why did the King and Queen care so much of it?

Chu Beijie noticed the almost undetectable expression on the Queen’s face and felt his heart skip a beat. With a slight tremor, he asked already knowing the answer, “Was it for Pingting?”

Pingting was away from his protection. If the King participated, then even with Moran’s help, there was little hope for her continued wellbeing.

Seeing that the King was unwilling to answer, Chu Beijie felt his heart grow cold.

“Brother?” Chu Beijie quietly called out, suppressing the swelling rage within.

His voice was very quiet with a slight tremor. If the sword hilt were not made of iron, it would have long been crushed.

Pingting.

They lured him back to get Pingting.

Could there have been a major upheaval during his delay in the Royal Residence?

Perhaps when he returned, he would no longer be able to see that familiar figure sitting beneath the tree?

Chu Beijie looked at the King, the feeling of betrayal evident in his eyes yet he could not help but feel the faintest flicker of hope.

He hoped that his brother would at least, on the account of their brotherly affection, leave Pingting a chance for survival.

Even the hardened hearted King of Dong Lin refused to meet his gaze, choosing instead to look away.

Noticing that his brother refused to meet his gaze, Chu Beijie froze.

His heart sank. He felt as if darkness was swallowing up his entire being.

The sixth.

“On the Duke’s birthday, could we be together?”

The sound of birds chirping surrounded him. He could see Pingting’s every smile and gesture imprinted on his very soul.

He made a promise for the sixth.

He felt numb.

As his fears began to overwhelm him, he felt his heart grow cold.

A moment later, a look of decisiveness swept across Chu Beijie’s face. Tightly grasping his sword, he turned to leave.

The guards surrounded Chu Beijie, pikes poised warily. However, as he walked towards the exit, power exuded with every step. The guards were shocked and unsure of whether to stop him or not. Chu Beijie’s sword remained pointed towards the ground. Seemingly unaffected by the steel pointed at him, the Duke pressed closer with his every step as if nothing could stop him, not even a blade to his heart.

His gaze was dark like the vast oceans, unfathomable. At this moment, anyone could feel a cold terrifying storm was gathering.

No one dared to meet his gaze just as no one dared to cross his sword.

Who has not heard of the mighty Duke of Zhen-Bei?

The guards were forced to step back in the face of his pressing aura.

“Let him go.” The King solemnly said.

The guards parted, making way for Chu Beijie to pass.

The Queen’s phoenix headpiece swayed as she called out, “King!”

“Does my Queen wish for me to kill him, or let him kill every single one of our guards?” The King stood stiffly. He stared at Chu Beijie’s figure until he finally left the courtyard and sighed heavily, “Let him go. It should be nearly over by now. Even if he reaches the residence, it will be too late for him to do anything.”

Even after Chu Beijie was long gone, the heavy atmosphere remained present. No one dared to move. Even the baby princess who seemed to sense the danger and gloom remained silent.

The King of Dong Lin looked at the slowly darkening sky, his eyes unreadable. Deep down was the slightest tinge of sorrow and regret.

The sound of footsteps finally broke the silence as the old Senior Official Chu Zairan clambered up the stairs and fell to his knees before the King, “King, after departing the palace, the Duke of Zhen-Bei directly appointed twelve young army officials, mustered a three thousand man cavalry unit with the command flag and left from the west gate.”

“Let him go.” The King of Dong Lin turned his eyes away from the distance and recovered his composure, walking down the stairs he gently said, “Without knowing the pain of loss, how could he grow to become the future King of Dong Lin?”

Beijie, go and see with your own eyes, the ruins of your home.

I hope that as you see the burning fire, see it swallowing the last shreds of your selfish desires.

As a King, to rule a nation, you may not have final reservations.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 34

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch34

The guards were vigilant while the maids were silenced. The huge secluded residence's atmosphere became silent in just a day. Rather than simply the lacking of the coo pigeon sounds, it was more like the quietness of death.

No one coughed or talked loudly. Even walking was done on tiptoes. It seemed that at just a slight sound would instantly attract a storm of enemies from every direction.

Pingting was sitting in Chu Beijie's office for the first time.

She methodically opened and read the scrolls of the related data in the pile on the desk. Several documents had Chu Beijie's comments of approval. In regards to military affairs and errors, his tone was cold and harsh but those pertaining to the livelihood of people, the statements were more simple and good-natured.

Occasionally there'd be one or two separate documents which appeared to be poems Chu Beijie wrote. His familiar handwriting was just like him, calm yet wild at the same time.

There was a white corner showing at the bottom of a scroll which may have been carefully hidden by its owner. Pingting's sharp eyes sought it out. It appeared to be a neat, well-structured drawing.

The picture was lifelike, the strokes with proper depth.

It had trees, a lake, snow, qin and the person holding the qin, in a pale green dress. The wind swept wisps of her silky black hair as she smiled and talked.

That smile was so beautiful, so beautiful that even Pingting was momentarily drunk.

She continued to dreamily look at it for a little longer and couldn't bear to look away.

"Miss Bai, there are only old documents and a few of the Duke's belongings on the desk. As for the maps and the latest reports, I have them here."

She only stopped her soul from floating happily on the four seas when she heard Moran's voice as he hurried in. She quickly stowed away the drawing, planning to put it back where it originally was. She stopped, grinded her teeth and hid the parchment in her arms.

She looked up to find Moran holding a pile of things.

"This is the personal letter that the King sent to the Duke to hurry him back to the capital." Moran rolled open the private, golden yellow scroll with tassels.

Pingting lowered her head to read it carefully. "Yun Chang and Bei Mo have combined forces? Ze Yin has left, leaving only Ruohan and Sen Rong. I reckon Ruo Han is better, but Yun Chang..." A familiar name suddenly jumped into her view and made her feel momentarily dizzy. She blinked and tried to read it more clearly, yet that familiar name that prickled her heart did not change the slightest on the scroll.

A thorn pierced at her heart.

Pingting's face paled and she slowly sat on the chair. Her voice was full of disbelief. "He Xia is currently being hunted by the King of Gui Le. How is he able to command Yun Chang's army to threaten the Dong Lin's borders?"

Moran couldn't help feel a little awkward as he explained, "He Xia married Princess Yaotian hence becoming the Prince Consort of Yun Chang and possessing the power to command Yun Chang's troops. Everyone under the skies knows this fact but your residence...The Duke said that Miss Bai no longer has any connection to He Xia therefore refused to let you know."

He glanced at Pingting whose pale face was as gleaming as snow.

So that was it.

He Xia had married.

He Xia's wife was the Princess of Yun Chang.

He Xia had used his marriage.

It turned out that he refused to let go of her.

Or perhaps, he refused to let go of Chu Beijie.

Everything now fell into place, accompanied with the heartache of interpretation. No matter how intelligent, she could not undo the inextricable knots of her heart.

Pingting remained silent, quietly rolling up the handwritten letter of the King of Dong Lin. She put it aside and slowly mouthed, "The battle at the border is unlikely to happen."

"How does Miss know?" Moran asked incredulously.

Pingting softly shook her head. "Because He Xia is already here. The main advisor is not on the border's battlefield, therefore how could there be a battle there?"

Moran's expression changed and lowered his voice. "Please do not joke, Miss. This is Dong Lin territory. If He Xia enters here, then wouldn't Dong Lin have been defeated already?"

"What victory or defeat? It is simply an advantageous deal to both parties. Without the the King of Dong Lin's support, how could He Xia bring his troops to this place?" Pingting's smiled a bit as she slowly swaggered to stand from the chair.

Her opponent was actually He Xia.

He was the only other famous general that could rival Chu Beijie. Back then, because of his existence, even Dong Lin could not easily attack Gui Le. Chu Beijie had to spend a lot of effort to plot conflict between the House of Jing-An and the King of Gui Le in order to drive him away from Gui Le.

He Xia's thoughts were always careful, always ensuring a tightly woven trap existed before making decisions such as unwittingly surrounding the enemy. He would then suddenly attack at the last minute, not letting the enemy have the slightest possibility of escape.

And today, he used his thundering tactics to try obtaining Bai Pingting.

Pingting's heart was bitter. She really wanted to cry, but her lips let out a trace of cold laughter instead. "Take away all the maps and topographical data, I don't need to see them. If we were evenly matched, then we could possibly still struggle a bit. However, in our current situation, we have not one chance of victory."

Her cold eyes glanced at Moran and her voice was calm and collected. "Even though we have no chance of victory, we may not lose."

Not caring about Moran's puzzled face, Pingting sauntered out of the office and stepped down the stairs.

She quickly headed for the residence's entrance, her footsteps gradually slowed down halfway. She seemed to have another thought. Taking a different course, she turned back towards her own room.

Zuiju and Hongqian were waiting nervously. Seeing Pingting walk towards them, they hurriedly walked out of the side room. They greeted her but did not know what to say.

Pingting observed them, knowing that no one could talk. Her heart was alarmed enough as is. There time was no time to comfort them, so she simply asked, "Who here has a crimson coloured dress?"

"I have one," said Hongqian.

"Bring it over." Pingting entered the room and found a comb, which she used to carefully straighten her silk strands of hair until it became one thrilling black waterfall.

Zuiju saw that she was combing her hair and approached her. "I'll help you," she offered, asking for the comb.

Pingting shook her head. "I'll do it myself."

Before the mirror, she slowly divided her hair into two sections. She wrapped a section around her finger and whirled it which soon became a black ring like a flower.

Pingting looked at the mirror and then her side view. She shook her head in dissatisfaction and let go, allowing her silky black hair to fall once more.

Just then Hongqian entered the room, with that crimson dress she found. She handed it to Pingting saying, “This is a crimson dress, but it’s very thin as it’s a summer dress.”

“That’s the exact colour.” Pingting took it over, stroked the fabric and noted it was indeed very thin. “Help me put it on.”

“How could you wear this on such a cold day?” Zuiju frowned, “I have a purple dress. Even though the colour isn’t the same at all, it is much warmer.”

Pingting dismissed the idea. “It has to be this colour.”

Her eyebrows rose slightly, not letting the others dare challenge her authority. They helped her into it. It was winter. Even if they were inside, Pingting still took off her undergarments, causing her to shiver wildly. Zuiju hurriedly draped a fur-lined coat over her, wrapping her from the outside.

Pingting gave her a look of gratitude and whispered, “I still need to do my hair.”

She refused Hongqian and Zuiju’s help and sat at the mirror by herself for a long time. Zuiju observed that her expression was full of concentration. While her ten fingers picked and pinched left and right around her hair. Gradually her small bun of hair had become several delicately blossoming black flowers. Both sides were perfectly combed and her hair fell softly on her tender white skin, completing the finishing touches to her appearance.

Hongqian was at one side, quietly watching. She sighed, “Although it’s pretty, it’s much too troublesome. Thankfully Miss is very dexterous. If it were me, perhaps it’d take much much longer.”

Zuiju too, couldn’t help commenting, “So pretty. It looks good with Miss’ face and eyes. It complements the natural temperament of Miss’ skeletal structural. It’s a hairstyle designed just for Miss.”

Slight colour returned to Pingting’s face with just their comments. She looked in the mirror and faintly replied, “It’s not combed very well as this is my first time doing it myself.” She stood up, thinking how terribly cold it was. She folded her hands against her coat to hide herself inside, away from the wind. She rolled her eyes once before straightening up and walking out the door.

Moran had been standing outside the small building. Seeing Pingting walk over, his expression fixed on her coat. Pingting was very thin. Even though the coat covered everything, he could still see that she was wearing a very thin layer underneath.

Pingting kept her hands inside the cloak. She raised her head to look at Moran but did not stop her footsteps. As she passed him, she whispered. "You, come with me."

She seemed to have decided already, her footsteps without hesitation as she passed through several doorways.

Paranoia was rampant, real or imagined. The guards closely protected the residence and each held a sword while standing straight, eyes wide open. The concentration of their vigilance for movement had increased significantly, but as soon as they saw Pingting's pear blossom-like figure, followed by Moran behind her, they couldn't help look surprised.

Pingting stopped at the entrance, silently staring at the sturdy gate made of steel rods.

Although it was in good condition, it was definitely not enough to withstand one round of He Xia's attacks. It was not one used by the army, so what were the chances of it surviving a siege's weaponry?

Her fist was slightly clenched. No one noticed her shoulder slightly shaking. She took a deep breath of the icy air and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes once more, they were full of resolution.

"Open the gate."

The guards were surprised and glanced at each other.

Moran quickly strode to her side. He lowered his voice, full of anxiety. "Miss Bai..."

"You're also a battlefield veteran. This place will not last. Rather than having He Xia attack his way in, it's better to just welcome him in." She smoothly articulated every word, like crystal raindrops pattered on every guard's hearts.

The most surprising thing, however, was that the rain that fell washed away

the dust in their hearts. Everyone was no longer worried about the outcome of failure and restored the calm composure they had before Chu Beijie.

“Open the door.” She commanded softly once more.

Everyone remembered her proud, straight back view.

They removed the heavy horizontal bolt. The door slowly swung open with a series of loud creaks. Bit by bit, the patch of nothingness that lay beyond the residence, the snowy mountains that gleamed in the sunlight, appeared before their eyes.

Pingting stood in the middle of the entrance, greeting the wind. A gentle light flickered in her eyes as she gazed at the trees and forests ahead. There was an expression difficult to put to words.

The House of Jing-An of the past was so far away yet so close.

Like how her bare feet was separated only by a thin layer of soil from the warm air of the quiet underground.

If one were to gently dig away this thin layer of soil, the air would gush out.

It would gush into her hair, her body, her lips, her flowing blood, her organs, her every pore until they would be warmed and pained at the same time.

Her expression shifted toward the horizon. Who still knew the direction of Gui Le? Who still remembers the green tiles of the Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Dear Duchess, Master's troops are in the snowy mountain forest opposite of here.

With just one order, the scene would become one of bloody rivers and death, a point of complete heartlessness to the point of no return.

A cold wind blew past them. Pingting turned away her gaze and looked at Moran.

She grinded her teeth slightly but her eyes held no hesitation. “On the highest point of this gate, raise a white flag.”

She was just like Chu Beijie. When she had decided something, no one could change her mind. Moran solemnly nodded.

Everyone knew without outside help, the residence would be captured sooner or later.

Captured or surrendered was simply the same thing.

The snow-white flag of shame slowly rose towards the highest point of the entrance. It unfolded in the force of the north wind, flapping a sound like cries of dissatisfaction.

Pingting took off her heavy coat, revealing her bright red dress.

Her red dress contrasted her white skin. She stood in her snow, the dress flapping exciting and beautiful.

Not just Moran but perhaps even Chu Beijie had never seen such a stunning Bai Pingting before.

Just by standing there wordlessly, she had already sucked away the energy of all nature, emptied all sights of the sky and earth.

Grief, concern, unspeakable thoughts of heartbreaking sadness, and the slightest trace of touching warmth were hidden in the depths of her eyes.

Her gaze rested on one place, in the forest mountain not too far away.

The branches were covered with a thick layer of snow, like a silver blanket. The pure white reflection gleamed back at everyone's hearts, which were contrarily full of depression and frustration. Just how many enemies lurked over there?

With just one battle drum, perhaps thousands of soldiers would surge forward, or perhaps millions would overwhelm them.

But Pingting's gaze did not contain fear or anger.

Her expression was surprisingly gentle. The familiar people were there. The people she had been punished with, spent nights guarding with, studied with, admired snow with and played qin with were all people she got along well with.

Her gaze tempted the crowd's like magic. They all turned to the same direction as she, all eyes fixed on the mountain forest.

At first, no movement could be detected in the distance. Gradually, dozens of strong warriors popped out of the snow. They parted silently in the middle,

allowing a tall handsome figure behind them to slowly move forward.

Dashing; like a star.

His lips did not move but still seemed to be laughing.

Unlike Chu Beijie's, his handsome face was a less angular but more gentle and romantic.

Yet his hand the held the sword, firm as Chu Beijie's.

From the moment he appeared, Pingting's eyes didn't ever waver, just like his gaze that remained on Pingting.

He Xia leisurely ambled towards Pingting. In the snow, he left lines of footsteps of equal length.

Moran's hand was clenched on the hilt of the sword, eyeing him like a hawk much like the other guards. His back was hunched as if prepared to use the fastest speed and most ruthless force to attack him at a moment's notice.

A few trusted confidants wearing casual clothing accompanied He Xia. They protected him from both sides. Every time He Xia took a few steps, the archers would alternate forwards and pull their bow towards the thousands of people around Pingting. They posed but did not fire.

Once the two parties grew close enough to exchange blows, He Xia stopped. He was before Pingting, close enough for her to see the complex struggle and oppression in his glittering eyes.

The cold wind froze the air to ice, freezing the distance between them. He could not take one step forward nor one step back.

It froze their bodies, just as much as it froze their words. It seemed to freeze the taste of smoke as well as the House of Jing-An's past.

He Xia had not considered the mixed feelings and the pain in her eyes when he stood before Pingting.

"Look, Master." In the end, Pingting broke the silence. She smiled openly and pointed her slender fingers at herself. "Isn't it pretty?"

The crimson dress was particularly eye-catching against the pristine whiteness

of the snow. This spotless white jolted him back to the tranquil Jing-An Ducal Residence, when a Pingting of around thirteen ran towards him on snow. Her crimson dress seemingly had left wide traces on the snow. She had pouted at him, who was reading in a pavilion. "Master is a liar. This colour is terrible as a dress. I will never wear this again as it's both silly and old-fashioned," she had said while walking away.

"Don't go! It's very pretty, extremely pretty. I'm not lying! Pingting, Pingting, don't go. Let me draw you." He immediately jumped into the snow, stopping her. He cheerfully laughed, "Just one drawing. When you see it, you will know I did not lie."

The snow remained.

Yet the Jing-An Ducal Residence has been reduced to ashes.

He Xia took a deep breath. "You hate wearing crimson red the most."

"But Master likes me wearing this colour the most." Pingting quietly gazed at the hem of the bright dress. She whispered, "Do you still remember the crimson dress I wore in the snow that time?" Her voice was like silk, distant and faraway, befitting of the endless number of stories they shared.

"I remember." He Xia sighed nostalgically. "I also know that right now, you're wearing one for me."

He sighed softly, took off the thick mink cold around his shoulders and stepped forward.

Almost all of the two parties' men were suspicious by this act. The arrows on their strings were nearly whipped forwards.

Yet all he did was gently place the coat on Pingting's shoulder and placed a palm on her cheek, warming her like he used to.

"Look, it's frozen stiff." Even the smile in his lips was the same.

Pingting obediently allowed him to dress and warm up her pale red face. She then heard He Xia murmur, "Why must you do this? Would I not come to see you even if you did not wear this colour? Am I really that heartless that I would completely forget our fifteen years of friendship?"

He studied her pityingly and raised his hand to slowly loosen her hair, letting the strands fall. “You have never combed your hair yourself before. Even if it’s similar, the way I combed it back then was not like this.”

Everyone’s eyes were watchful.

One was the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, the other was the woman of the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

To the observers, this situation was both pure and beautiful as both had the best memories tucked in the depths of their heart. A place that once held no fear had been shattered with just a cough, leaving them with the fragments of reality.

The past and the current seemed to fall.

It seemed that Pingting was still his maid when they rode galloping horses together, dined together and played ridiculously pointless games together. The soothing yet fragile frame, coupled with her crystal clear eyes and her smiles pleased him since childhood.

At any time, all he had to do was just yell, “Pingting! Pingting!” which would then set off a series of calls in the ducal residence to summon Pingting. Pingting would then hurriedly come after hearing the summoning. She’d look up, her eyes clear and bright and he’d hear, “What’s wrong? I’m busy and don’t have time to be your model.”

As for Chu Beijie, so what about Chu Beijie?

How could he steal away her soul, her heart and their fifteen years of friendship in just a few, countable days?

“Pingting, I miss you.”

“The three hundred thousand soldiers that pressured the King of Dong Lin to transfer Chu Beijie were sent just for you.”

“How is Chu Beijie treating you? He left you just because of a King’s command.”

“He’s not good to you at all, so why lower yourself to him? Wouldn’t you be happy if you live the way we used to?”

He Xia pointed at the trusted elite soldiers behind him. "I have brought these soldiers through the ends of the earth here and endured attacks. Pingting, you understand what this means right? I've never wanted to harm you."

"Does Master mean that you would like me to go with you?" Pingting's expression drifted as she leisurely asked.

"Do you not want to?"

"How could I?" Pingting's gaze shifted towards the white flag raised high up which was probably the first sign of disgrace on Chu Beijie's property. "The white flag has already been raised, so what could Pingting possibly say?" She chuckled softly and glanced at He Xia, her face sideways to him. "Would you like to take away the person? Or would you like to take away the heart?"

He Xia gave a fleeting expression of hurt. He lowered his voice, "Both."

A trace of a sad, bitter smile escaped from her beautiful lips. Pingting sighed, "Master, how much of this is really for Pingting? You don't want to use force on me because you want to deliver a bigger blow on Chu Beijie. If he knew that I willingly parted with you, this would mean a much greater loss than losing a battle at the borders to him." She leisurely sighed a few more times. Her tone firmed, "Fine, as long as you promise me one thing, I will willingly come with you."

He Xia had been listening to her elegant voice and was surprised at this. He immediately asked, "How long would you like to wait?"

"The sixth."

"Pingting, Chu Beijie won't come back."

"If so, I will go with you." She lifted her index finger to her mouth and bit viciously down on it. Her bright red blood dripped onto the snow and spreaded like plum blossoms suddenly blossoming.

"I, Bai Pingting, swear to the sky that if the Duke of Zhen-Bei does not arrive by the sixth, will willingly go with He Xia, the Prince Consort of Yun Chang. If I violate this oath, then I shall die without proper burial."

All of the men present on the two sides listened to her resounding oath and

couldn't help feeling impressed.

A battle was looming with the presence of soldiers and He Xia's identity of importance that was a threat to the country meant that the sooner they left, the better. Regardless of strength, the Duke of Zhen-Bei's men had already raised a flag, so Bai Pingting should just go with them. Why wait for two days?

No one sane would agree to these conditions.

He Xia's voice remained prideful however. He nodded, "Fine. I'll come get you on the sixth."

Moran saw him turn away to leave, and without hesitation, beckoned the guards to protect. As the enemy's arrows remained pointed towards the residence, they retreated.

He watched them gradually retreat back to the forests before realising the hand on the hilt of his sword was soaked with sweat.

Snow covered the vast earth before them, empty and bleak.

Pingting just stood there, staring at the direction where He Xia disappeared.

"Miss Bai?" Moran took a step forwards, his words a loud whisper.

Pingting turned towards him, her eyes almost as clear as crystal. There was a faint sad smile on her lips. "Fifteen years of friendship can only be exchanged for the time of two days." She didn't move, just raised her head and looked towards the east. In a soft voice she asked, "From his words, it seems that the Duke will not be able to hurry back by the sixth. What do you think?"

He Xia hesitated and replied, "He Xia seems to be very sure. Perhaps the King is helping in the capital. If that's the case, I'm afraid..."

"But being the Duke he is, who could stop him if he really wanted to return?" Pingting's tone was relaxed as she whispered, "If he really has me in his heart, then he will definitely rush back by the sixth."

He had to come back.

Alcohol, women, power or force could not stop him.

As long as he remembers our promise, then he would definitely come back to

see me.

Zuiju accompanied Hongqian inside the courtyard, their hearts skipping every few beats. They saw the white flag being raised in the distance. Hongqian, whose face was as white as paper, reluctantly snooped around a little, listening carefully for any sounds.

Not one battle cry could be heard.

It seemed that even the wind had been intimidated and was afraid to make any sounds.

They had waited until the strings of their heart felt like snapping before they saw Moran accompanying Pingting back inside. Pingting was as pale as white jade with a trace of exhaustion. The coat on her shoulders was no longer the pure white one she had been wearing when she left but a dark mink. The two then slipped quietly inside. As Pingting was not speaking, Zuiju didn't say anything either as she brought hot tea for her or when helping her to sleep comfortably. When all this was done, she looked at Moran before lifting the door curtain to go outside.

"What's going on? I saw the white flag." Zuiju asked as she opened the doors to look at the mountains. She had a special status as she was an old friend to Moran.

Moran frowned and reported the events one by one.

The development had been surprising. Although it should've been impossible, Bai Pingting had gained the time of two days.

When Zuiju heard that He Xia had immediately agreed, her eyes were suddenly bright. She breathed in deeply and slowly sighed. "No wonder people say that Gui Le's Marquess of Jing-An is the only person that is comparable to our Duke. Such a hearty personality! Doesn't it make you wonder why he doesn't teach Yun Chang's Princess to handle military affairs properly?"

Yet this tactic was one that only Bai Pingting could propose and only one that He Xia would agree to.

Apart from those two, regardless of who was exchanged for another, it would have been an impossible situation.

Moran's thoughts remained full of worries. He frowned, "Miss Bai is fairly relaxed and says that Duke can definitely return by then. But what if the Duke is delayed over there, what should we do then? With the current assets in He Xia's hands, even if we put out lives at stake to fight, we will still be unable to rush out with Miss Bai."

Zuiju was silent for a long time but argued back, "Even if you could rush out with Miss Bai, Miss Bai wouldn't want to go with you. He Xia is risking death by granting her wish, so how could she betray the person she swore to? Not to mention..." She sucked her lip, staring down at her embroidered shoes for a long time. Her voice was a little sad, "Besides, why should she stay here if the Duke doesn't really see her as important and doesn't hurry back?"

That romantic, exquisitely carved Bai Pingting was not an ordinary person.

She could take a hundred times more pain but could not stand sadness.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 35

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The two were secretly upset.

Moran said, “Although He Xia promised not to move until the sixth, we must not underestimate him. I’d better do a few more adjustments to the defence arrangement of this residence.”

Zuiju nodded and watched Moran turn to leave. She thought of something and said a soft, “Ah,” but stopped herself from calling Moran, letting him leave.

Returning to the room, she saw Hongqian was sitting on a chair taking a nap. Her thoughts were the most shallow and had been recently subjected to much shock. Seeing that Pingting and Moran had safely returned, she realised that the danger had passed and finally slept. Hearing the sound of the door curtain, she slowly opened her eyes and realized Zuiju had returned. She placed a fingertip to her mouth.

“Hush...” She pointed at the inner room, closed her eyes, placed both her hands to one side and tilted her head, imitating a sleeping pose.

Zuiju gave her a look of understanding and quietly crept into the room, quietly probing.

Pingting was lying on the bed, her long hair scattered around. One clump was softly falling from the bed. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be sleeping.

A thick blanket covered her, but the window was still opened, allowing cold wind to flow inside.

Zuiju whispered, “Such a bad habit ought to be corrected.” She quietly tiptoed towards the bedside, carefully reaching out. She had yet to touch the window

when she heard a soft voice coming down from below.

“Don’t close it. The blowing wind refreshes my mind.”

Zuiju lowered her head to look and saw that Pingting had already opened her eyes. How could they be considered sleepy when possessing such brightness?

“It’s better to close it as it won’t be funny if you get a cold.” Zuiju stubbornly closed the window and turned to sit down by the bed. She reached out into the blankets, rummaging for Pingting’s slender wrists which she pressed two fingers against to check her pulse. She calmly listened for a while before lightly laughing, “All good.”

She returned the hand to its original place before lowering her voice. “I’ve already heard from Moran. I don’t know what to say, really.”

Pingting revealed a gentle smile and asked a question in return, “Don’t tell me you’re worried that the Duke won’t be back too?”

Zuiju looked at Pingting in the eye.

She accompanied her teacher when saving lives and was familiar with nobles and officials. She was more or less a friend of all of the ladies of the big families in Dong Lin, perhaps even the concubines of the Royal Residence, yet she had never met someone like Bai Pingting.

Intelligence, joy, and aloofness were soaked into her bones. How could the House of Jing-An produce such a casually elegant He Xia of swords and song while looking after a person like Bai Pingting?

Pingting saw that Zuiju was silent and gently returned her stare.

The two pairs of bright eyes looked at each other silently, as if trying to measure the other’s intentions.

Hongqian happened to come in and saw two people staring stupidly at one another. In a surprised voice, she said, “So Miss Bai wasn’t sleeping? I restricted my movements to very small ones so that I wouldn’t wake you. What on earth could you possibly be staring at each other for? A flower can’t be formed from it.”

Zuiju shifted her gaze and turned to look at Hongqian. She half laughed, half

scowled, "You're so noisy, interrupting people when they're thinking deeply about things."

Pingting also looked at her, asking, "Why'd you come in?"

"Look at the time," Hongqian pointed outside. "Seeing that Miss was asleep, I didn't dare ask before, but aren't you two hungry?"

Zuiju raised her head to look outside. "True, no wonder I felt hungry. Thanks to all of the suspense today, I completely forgot about eating."

"The food has been made already, so I'll bring it over." Hongqian headed outside.

Although the kitchen's matron had been shocked all day, her workmanship was still excellent.

Several layers of the food package were brought over. As usual, there were two meat dishes, two vegetable dishes and a few side dishes.

Pingting's appetite had never been too good. Since she wasn't in the mood today, she had even less of an appetite than usual. She picked small bits and dropped them with her chopsticks.

Zuiju saw her put down her chopsticks and hurriedly said, "At least drink a bowl of soup and finish a bowl of rice."

She quickly put in a few slices of meat in Pingting's bowl, giving her a look.

Pingting had no appetite at all, but seeing Zuiju's evil look, she touched her lower abdomen before forcing the meal in her bowl down in silence.

Only then did Zuiju smile, satisfied.

After dinner, Zuiju and Hongqian quickly and methodically packed up the food container by loading the plates into it.

Zuiju then said, "Let me go." She left Hongqian to accompany Pingting and carried the heavy food container across the courtyard when she happened to see the kitchen's matron coming towards her.

"Miss Zuiju, it is cold. You don't need to personally return it; I can do it myself." The matron stopped when she saw Zuiju.

Zuiju handed the food package to her, and took something out from her sleeve."Nevermind this, I still have to give you the menu for tomorrow. Cook with this prescription and add other ingredients for flavour. Use the best ingredients and don't forget to use the right amount."

All of the people in the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence obeyed her words. The matron looked at the recipe under the moonlight and said, "Such clear instructions. Good work, Miss Zuiju. You're meticulous enough to even cover diet. No wonder Miss Bai's face seems to be much healthier than before. However..." The matron's tone shifted, her expression becoming serious, "The acutiloba on this recipe has been used by Miss Bai a few days ago, so the kitchen has currently run out. The kitchen never had peony petals to begin with, but there's some aged aster."

Zuiju replied, "This mustn't be delayed. Even if I explained, you wouldn't understand. Just quickly collect or buy some according to my prescription."

"Geez, Miss must be confused. Who could possibly leave the residence right now? The security of the entrance is even tighter than the capital's entrance."

Only then did Zuiju remember that soldiers surrounded them. She slapped her hand against her forehead, "Indeed I must be confused. Speaking of that, does the kitchen have enough resources to last until the sixth?"

"The stocked rice is enough to last a year. It's unlikely that anyone would die of starvation, but there aren't enough vegetables. Even though there is a small vegetable garden at the back and poultry, Miss has to think about how many people there are in this residence. Forget the women, they don't eat much at all, but how could those well-built guards stay away from having a huge bowl of meat and rice? I reckon the meat and vegetables will only last a day."

The matron looked around them and went closer, lowering her voice, "The pork is sent here every three days and we have already finished all of it in these last two days, so there will be no more pork starting tomorrow. We haven't any fresh fish either, so chicken and duck will have to do. General Chu said this wasn't anything of importance and ordered not to inform Miss Bai. I'm telling you this, but please don't tell her."

Zuiju nodded. "I'll come with you to the kitchen, to see what else is left. I'll see

and write another prescription from them. Matron, make sure everyone follows them. No matter how many soldiers are circling outside, I only care that the best possible food is delivered to Miss Bai.”

“Of course. As long as the kitchen has those things in stock, then each will be delivered without error, exact to your prescription.”

The two people slowly walked in the snow. The moon came out of the clouds, but it was not as bright as the previous days. Its yellow light was slightly hazy. Their feet plodded through the somewhat thinner layer of snow. The snow creaked and crunched as they crushed it into pieces under their footsteps.

As they arrived at the kitchen, they sighted a sudden movement.

“What?”

Zuiju gave a frightened cry as they saw a glowing red light at the gates to the residence. It seemed to be the combination of several flames from fiery torches.

The sound of the heavy door swinging open in the distance was heard. Although it was soft, it brought a dangerous atmosphere.

The matron looked at the flame in the sky, her lips quivering. “Oh God, don’t tell me the attackers are inside?”

Zuiju remained silent and plucked up her courage to leave the kitchen building. She took a side pathway to reach the entrance of the residence. She carefully went towards it, hiding behind the walls. Zuiju saw the person holding the flame outside the entrance. At this time of night, she guessed the person had to be one of He Xia’s men.

Not long later, the door slowly closed, shutting out the flame from the outside, only leaving a dimmer light within the residence.

Zuiju saw Moran with two other guards push a heavily guarded cart, passing the wall she was standing at.

“Who’s there?” Moran suddenly said. The swords of the other two guards were immediately unsheathed.

“It’s me.”

Moran sighed in relief and was a little reprimanding. “Why are you not

accompanying Miss Bai at such a time? Isn't there enough chaos out here already?"

The two guards made sure it was Zuiju before sheathing their weapons.

"I was planning to go to the kitchen, but came here when I heard movement. What were those people doing?"

"Sending things."

"Sending things?"

"Fresh meat, fresh fish and various differently coloured fruits. I've already checked that the cart is not hiding people or weapons." Moran laughed bitterly and pointed at the cart packed full of things. "You came at the right time. After getting these to the kitchen, use your needle to test if anything's strange."

Zuiju looked at the full cart and couldn't help sigh. "Knowing He Xia, there is no way he'd use such a tactic, but I will examine them properly."

The two guards helped Zuiju to wheel the cart to the kitchen and unloaded everything. In addition to the pork, beef, fresh fish and vegetables, there were a number of other rare things.

There were a few jars of authentic Gui Le dishes, seasoned dried rare fish, Bei Mo's delicacies befitting for a queen as well as a plate of both crispy and soft desserts.

The other matrons of the kitchen stood aside while watching Zuiju examine the dishes with a needle. They couldn't help praising when they saw that each were exquisitely made by the finest, most talented chefs possible. "Just their appearances comply with the saying that Gui Le's desserts are superb."

Apart from that, there was also a gilded box wrapped with several layers of silk. It had been placed in the innermost section of the cart. Zuiju unwrapped one layer after the other and realised the contents were not food but various little items women used.

There was a clamshell which contained hand cream of the finest quality, as well as a small

At least a dozen of small, multicoloured pebbles were placed at the bottom of

the box. Zuiju looked at the three objects that were inside, her gaze not moving. She sighed in both praise and envy.

By the time she had examined, everything the sky had already brightened. Zuiju's back ached with exhaustion. She told the kitchen servants, "These are all fine, eat as much as you like. He Xia really is a good man to even prepare acutiloba that nourishes women. Forget changing the prescription, just use the one from last night."

"But we still don't have peony petals."

"Oh well, just don't add it. It doesn't really matter about the peony petals. The acutiloba is the most important." Zuiju replied, tiredly massaging her shoulders. She then headed for the small building with the gilded box.

Hongqian was already up and was stretching out on the snow. Seeing Zuiju, she asked, "I didn't see you yesterday evening at all. Before Miss went to sleep, she asked me to go ask what was holding you up at the kitchen."

"Where is she?"

"Still sleeping." Hongqian beckoned towards the door with a lift of her chin. "I slept in the same room as her last night. She kept on tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Ah, I heard the guards saying that we're still surrounded by soldiers? Hadn't they retreated already when Miss Bai and General Chu returned yesterday? And what's this about a promise on the sixth? What are we to do if the Duke does not return by the sixth?"

Zuiju lowered her voice, "Even if you wanted to control it, you can't, so it's better not to ask."

Hongqian had thought that the guard she always joked with her was just trying to scare her. With that, her face paled, understanding the current danger.

Zuiju knew that the current situation was even worse than what Hongqian was thinking but refused to say any more. She patted her on the shoulder and strode up the steps, entering Pingting's room.

Pingting had awoken long ago and had kicked the blankets to one side. A lilac coat hung from her shoulders as she lazily knelt on the bed. She tilted her head to one side, her hand stroking down her hair. When seeing Zuiju enter with the

gilded box, she looked at it, asking, "What's that?"

Zuiju knew that she was feeling restless and wanted to tease her. She placed the gilded box at the head of the bed, mischevously smiling, "Guess. If you get it right, then you have my admiration."

Pingting looked at the box, her light gaze moved aside. "Something annoying again..."

She sighed, not bothering with Zuiju and opened it herself.

She lightly glanced at the three objects in the gilded box and picked up the comb. She stared at it and beyond. She slowly dragged out, "I used to use this a lot at the Jing-An Ducal Residence back then."

She placed the comb down and didn't touch the other two objects. She grabbed a handful of the pebbles and carefully counted them before putting them back in. Pingting laughed bitterly, "I used fifteen years of friendship to bargain with him and he uses fifteen years of friendship to trap me." She slammed the box shut and slipped off the bed.

After washing with hot water, Zuiju approached her to comb her hair. Zuiju held onto the silky black strands and twisted them into a peony bun. She saw that the reflected face was drained of both happiness and worry. She had no clue what she was thinking, just like a thin layer of fog developing on the mirror surface.

"Miss! Why aren't you saying anything?"

Pingting was silent for a long time before saying, "I am very tired."

Zuiju replied, "Since you're so tired, you should sleep since nothing is happening anyway. I'll get the kitchen to make some red bean porridge and boil it. That way, it can immediately be served when you wake up."

Pingting shook her head.

When Zuiju had just put down the comb. Pingting looked into the bronze mirror and stood up, lifting the curtain to go outside. Zuiju hurriedly followed her outside. Pingting entered the side room and took out the pot of plum blossom petals out.

“Let me carry it.”

Pingting turned sideways so Zuiju would take it with her hands but then shook her head. She carried the pot down the steps and walked towards the corner where Hongqian had swept the snow away the day before. Although there wasn't much snow, a night had passed with a thin layer of frost.

Pingting placed the pot down, picked up a broom and swept the floor before grabbing a shovel.

Zuiju didn't say a word. She actually felt a little afraid. She stood helpless at one side, saying, “Be careful not to strain your back.”

Pingting didn't hurry. She used the shovel to dig little by little. The uppermost layers of soil were the hardest but after that, it was gradually softer and much easier to dig through.

Several moments later, a small hole began to form. Fine beads of sweat formed on Pingting's forehead. Her cheeks were several shades redder than before.

She still did not hurry. Pingting placed the shovel down, quietly resting for a while to allow her breath to calm. She then picked up the pot beside her and placed it neatly into the hole. She adjusted left and right until she was satisfied., Pingting did not think it was dirty as she reburied the pot using her own two hands.

After this final use of effort, Pingting breathed out deeply and raised head, smiling at Zuiju who was still standing one side. “All that's left is the cooking fire on top.”

Her black eyes brightened, a smile in her eyes lifting like a wave with a gentle splash.

Zuiju did not quite understand why her heart seemed to stop for a while. A sour taste stayed in her nose as if preparing to cry. She hurriedly wiped her eyes and pasted on a cheerful face, “Sure, I'll bring the firewood.”

She got the firewood from the kitchen. The task was exchanged with Hongqian, who then brought them to the new burial site. She lit the pile. Not long later, the dry firewood began to crackle. Its fiery red glow flickered in the

snow. It coloured the three people's cheeks, nice and warm.

Pingting sweated a lot, but she seemed to be a lot better. She gazed at the flames, suddenly saying, "Never just stand around a fireplace. Ask the kitchen for some meat and salt. Let's eat some roasted meat."

Although Hongqian was worried about the surrounding troops, she understood the concept that pleasure can also exist in pain. She replied, "I'll get it."

She soon returned, crunching the snow with her footsteps while carrying a heavy basket in her hands.

"Pork loin, chicken wings, cleaned duck legs and two fishes with removed intestines and head. I don't know what Miss would like to roast, so I just got the kitchen matrons to prepare these." Hongqian settled the basket down, spreaded out a blue blanket in the snow and took out the items one by one. "I've also got the salt and allspice. The matrons said that eating roast alone was too dry and will bring some premade soup shortly."

Pingting clapped her hands, "Well done Hongqian, very thoughtful. If I were a general, I'd appoint you as at least a back up advisor no matter what."

She sat on the stone bench with an additional thick shawl on her shoulders. Zuiju was afraid that she was cold and had gone back to the room to retrieve it.

Hongqian saw Pingting's smile. Her heart was much more relaxed. She laughed, "That's not it. The matrons said not to hold the meat while roasting but use something to skewer them instead, so I have a few thin iron bars here."

She lowered her head and took out a few thin iron bars from the basket. It had been properly washed while the accompanying guaze was new.

With all preparations complete, the three people sat around the fire ready to enjoy this winter barbeque.

They picked up a thin bar and threaded slices of meat or fish onto it before placing on top of the fire. The red flame softly roasted. The results were both fresh and interesting. The more they did it, the more fun and interesting it seemed.

“My father has a hunter’s stove. When I used to accompany him to hunt, I played with it a few times.” Hongqian appeared to have a lot of experience as she rotated the bar in her hand. She sighed, “After getting into the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, such times were no more.”

“How’d you enter the Ducal Residence? The Duke bought you?”

Hongqian hurriedly shook her head. “The Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence has no need to buy people. People would do anything to be admitted. There’s enough food and drinks to go around here, less beating and the Master is our Duke. When my father does hunt something, I’d be half full, but when he doesn’t, I’d be without a meal. It’s a harsh life, but thankfully I was lucky enough to squeeze in here. Occasionally I’d take a few things to my father.”

This was the first time Zuiju had ever heard such a thing from Hongqian. She didn’t hesitate to ask, “Don’t you miss your father after coming to such a remote place?”

“How could I know? My father was sadly not blessed. He died just three years after my entry in the Ducal Residence. The Duke noted family relationships when he left the capital. He knew I had nowhere to go, so he took me along.”

Zuiju then understood why the number of young maids in the residence was very little, yet there were a great number of the older matrons. All of them were old and had no place to return to.

She was roasting duck leg. The meat was thick, so she had to wait patiently until it was fully cooked. Her gaze rested on Pingting, and she gasped, “This fiery red is harsh to the eyes. Roasted food will raise your temperature. This isn’t good to your body at all.”

The fish in Pingting’s hands happened to be cooked. Despite her first time making it personally and her thoughts in the distance, it was still roasted to a golden crisp. Hearing Zuiju’s words, she carefully slid the fish off the bar and put it on the plate. She handed it to them, “Since it’s like that, I won’t have any then. You two may have it.”

Hongqian stared enviously at the fish. She cheered loudly and handed her own wire to Zuiju, “Hold this for me.”

She then took the dish filled with tasty roasted fish.

Zuiju saw that she was thinking the best for her unborn child and smiled admiringly at her. She offered a few words of comfort, "Even though you say you won't have any, there are still other delicious food. I've asked the matrons to prepare steamed pork trotters with acutiloba and red dates."

Just as she said this, a matron had already entered the courtyard with a food package. She saw everyone was happily playing about and smiled, "Be careful of your hands. Being poked by the wire of the gauze mat and tip of the bars is very sore. I tried it in the kitchen several times before this."

She opened the food package on the blue cloth and served a bowl to each of the three people. Pingting was indeed served with steamed pork trotters with acutiloba and red dates.

Pingting held onto the spoon. She watched the two people roast their food while steadily eating the contents in her bowl. She smiled.

The activity continued for nearly an hour. Both the food had been depleted, and the firewood was in its final flickers. The three stood up and threw water to extinguish the fire.

"Should we remove the pot?" Hongqian asked.

"No need. It's better for it to soak up the taste of mud, so wait until the Duke returns before collecting."

Like that, the first half of the day passed. The following half was much slower. Zuiju and Hongqian gossiped in a room, while Pingting went to take a nap. She slept for almost three hours. By the time she had woken, it was already dark.

She hazily got up and pushed the window open. The evening wind was not strong, but the cloud layer was much too thick. She couldn't see the moon at all.

"Zuiju? Zuiju?" She anxiously called.

Zuiju walked inside, asking, "You're awake?"

"What time is it? Has the moon passed a half? Is it already the sixth?"

Zuiju paused for a moment. She slowly walked over and sat on the bed. "Miss Bai, the sky has not been dark for long. It is still the fifth," she replied.

Hearing her words, the anxiety from seeing the sky's colour lifted. She faintly replied, "Oh," before her body relaxed, and she fell back onto the bed.

Zuiju then asked, "The kitchen brought dinner over but I rarely see you sleeping so soundly so I told Hongqian not to bother you. It's currently simmering on the stovetop in the side room. Now that you're awake, you might as well have some."

Pingting seemed to be thinking about something. At first, she shook her head at Zuiju's words, but then thought about it and nodded instead. "Bring it over, I'll have some."

Hongqian served up the hot meal.

Pingting managed to finish half a bowl before frowning, "I just can't eat any more." She placed her chopsticks down.

Zuiju saw Pingting really couldn't eat any more based from her expression and knew her mind could not be changed. She softened her voice, "That's fine."

Hongqian packed away the dishes and went out of the room with Zuiju. She stopped outside the door, asking, "She was all happy-go-lucky this morning. Why has she forgotten over a nap and become like this? It seems that great intelligence is no good. They have very bizarre emotions."

Zuiju hurriedly silenced her, lowering her voice as she chattered back, "You know what? If you were her, you'd probably have long gone crazy."

Hongqian poked out her tongue and entered the side room.

Zuiju stood by herself outside the door and looked at the patch of pale snow on the courtyard. A cold gust of wind seemingly stroked her neck. Just how Pingting would put it, it was quite refreshing.

Pingting wasn't the only one upset. Her heart seemed to be clawed by a cat too.

The worst thing, she knew, was the dangerous path that led to an abyss-like ridge laying before them.

The war between the four countries was intensifying. It used to be the Dong Lin army attacking Gui Le and Bei Mo, but now it was an alliance of Yun Chang and

Bei Mo's army attacking Dong Lin.

Endlessly causing loss of life.

Everyone understood what the danger meant, even the most stupid of the nobles.

Her teacher, Huo Yunan, was born a noble. He knew Dong Lin's upperclass and thoroughly understood their reactions.

Who could guarantee that their country would not collapse under the enemy country's power? Who could stand the eventual demise of their home?

A country was a home, but only with a country could one have a home.

Who wasn't like that?

Zuiju deeply sighed, her chest so stuffy that it was sore. She grinded her teeth and determinedly undid her cloak, letting the cold wind flow inside until the lava churning inside be frozen. She shivered three or four times before buttoning up her clothes and took the hot tea from the side room to Pingting who she then helped to sleep.

That night, she slept in the other bed in Pingting's room.

She suddenly heard a voice in the middle night. Zuiju got up and rubbed her eyes, seeing that Pingting had woken and sitting on the bed.

"Why have you woken again, Miss Bai?" Zuiju got off the bed, and walked until she was beside her. Her voice was soft as she questioned.

Pingting was silently staring at the sky outside the window. Her gaze remained fixed as she answered, "The moon has come out."

Zuiju followed her gaze and looked up at the sky. The moon had indeed come out of the clouds some time earlier, but it was dim, listlessly bleak.

Studying the position carefully, she realised that it had passed half the sky.

The moon had passed half the sky.

The sixth had come...

Zuiju's heart sunk, but her words remained warm. "There is still one day and the Duke must be hurrying back."

Pingting's voice was like calm waves. "He must be on the horse, very, very tired. His throat must be dry and hoarse, completely covered dust except for his shoulders where snow has accumulated."

Zuiju could only think that her voice was drifting from the ends of the earth. It was like a leisurely pluck of a qin string that trembled in to beckon the flowers and trees. She lowered her head to look at her expression but could not find any clues.

She then draped the blankets around Pingting, accompanying her by sitting at the head of the bed. The two watched the moon moving. More than an hour had passed before Zuiju softly encouraged, "Go to sleep."

Pingting obediently lay down onto the bed and closed her eyes. Zuiju sighed in relief and got off the bed to return to her own. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Pingting's eyes flicker open.

"What?"

Pingting glanced at Zuiju, laughing ruefully. "Nothing." She then obediently closed her eyes once more.

That night at the Hua Residence, Chu Beijie had thought she was Lady Hua's mute maid and had said, "Sleep," when seeing she was sick.

That person who did whatever he wanted, without the slightest care for the world's social conventions. He had not known her well, yet he'd carried her by the waist and took her into her room, placing her on the bed before clumsily covering her with blankets.

His stiff "Sleep" was just like a command he gave to his soldiers, yet it was memorable now that she thought about it.

He will come back; he will definitely be back.

Her slender palm clenched into a tight fist under the blankets.

If such deep love could not withstand such a test and simply melt into running water, what was the point of the two swords, Parting Soul and Divine Spirit?

The moon had passed half the sky.

The sixth had arrived.

Chu Beijie was wildly galloping forwards.

The morning north wind whistled in his ear.

In his life, he had galloped so wildly numerous times, letting his horse's four hooves fly off. He'd indulge himself in the ride with his cloak fluttering in the wind. Even mountains were unable to stop his approaching figure.

Galloping across the plains was a heroic pleasure.

But at this time, he could not feel any pleasure.

The wind blew hard at him. It was painful like sword wounds on his face. Not only did the wind tear at his face, it tore at his heart.

His heart was like a grill on fire which remained suspended in the air.

The secluded residence was a place inaccessible to his eyes.

Yet the faint fragrance of plum blossoms lingered in his heart.

Chu Beijie deeply understood the King's intention. He knew from the way his Brother did everything he could to lengthen his stay at the capital that an irresistible force must've headed towards the secluded residence.

How could Pingting's white jade hands that played qin possibly return the King of Dong Lin's challenge of war?

Was his thin figure heading towards the dazzling white of a sword?

The soft body that he couldn't hug enough of, the handsome little face that he couldn't look enough of, the clear singing voice he couldn't hear enough of...

...Why did those wretched men refused to spare her, gently let go of her?

She had secluded herself.

She no longer cared about the affairs of the outside.

She had had enough sorrow and had been hurt over and over again. She just wanted to do things like the old times, and if she could, be a satisfied woman.

As Chu Beijie's woman.

"Pingting is not greedy, just hopes that Duke will come to see Pingting once before heading out to the battlefield. On Duke's birthday, Pingting wants to tell

Duke something very important.”

This was a very simple wish.

A wish that even normal men could grant.

Yet he was not a normal man. He was Chu Beijie, Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Chu Beijie raised his whip and crazily brought it down, his eyes bloodshot. The wind continued to harshly cut his face, not offering any comfort for the immense irritation in his heart.

A dirty mix of snow and mud scattered on the sides of the long road in the middle that extended forwards, seemingly boundless.

The return home seemed longer than ever.

Chu Beijie rode on, his gaze fixed at the horizon.

Was Pingting still safe, beyond the clouds?

A flag appeared in the distance, jumping into his view. There was a group of horses and men moving towards him. Chu Beijie studied the flag which opened in the wind, to read the familiar character for “Mu”.

Chu Beijie’s heart skipped a beat. He whipped his horse which was already foaming at its mouth. He surged towards the group, abruptly pulled back his horse, yelling “Why is Chen Mu here?” He had not drunk any water for a long time, so his voice was very hoarse.

Seeing Chu Beijie, he hurriedly gathered his soldiers forward. He dismounted and bowed, “Duke, Chen Mu is here!”

“How dare you leave the Dragon Tiger Barracks you’re in charge of?”

Chen Mu replied, “I received the King’s Order five days ago to transfer to Luo Meng and report to the Duke of Fu-Lang and is now returning to the capital to report to the King.”

“Who is currently managing the Dragon Tiger Barracks?”

“According to the King’s Order, managing rights have been temporarily transferred to General Fen Min representing the Duke of Fu-Lang.”

General Fen Min received orders from the Duke of Fu-Lang. Even if Pingting

used the Precious Divine Soul Sword, her identity was not enough to mobilise the Dragon Tiger Barracks.

The King of Dong Lin had taken extreme measures against his own brother.

Chu Beijie's fury attacked both his heart and mind, his eyes dizzily blurry.

Pingting had no hope for help, apart from him.

Knowing Pingting's intelligence, she would definitely remember the promise on the sixth and would do everything to delay the enemy until his return.

Wait for me, you have to wait for me!

Chu Beijie's palms were full of red blisters, but he did not feel any pain. He suddenly seized the reins and sat up straight.

Chen Mu had followed him onto the battlefield for many years. Seeing his expression, he knew that he had already gone at full speed for a long time. He handed him a water sac, "Please have some water, Duke. Is Duke rushing towards a battlefield emergency? No soldier or horse can withstand such a rabid journey."

Chu Beijie took over the sac and drained it dry in a series of gulps, before looking back at the three thousand soldiers that had galloped with him for two nights and a day.

Since leaving the capital, they had whipped their fast horses several times, moving at full speed. They had not rested at all and were exhausted. The marks of the reins were bloodstains of their hands. A few dozen were completely unable to stand it and had fallen off their horses.

He had led soldiers for several years but never displayed such lack of care to them.

Chu Beijie's expression fell as he turned back. He asked Chen Mu, "How many men have you got?"

"Not many, just one thousand seven hundred. All of them are my best."

"Give them to me." Chu Beijie took the command flag and raised it high in the air, yelling, "I am commanding all of the country's troops, so all soldiers here, listen! Among the three thousand, those who can't stand pain and those whose

horses can't last, go with Chen Mu to the capital. Chen Mu's one thousand and seven hundred men are also now in my command and we shall immediately set off." He dismounted, and leapt onto Chen Mu's energetic horse, lowering his voice, "Lend me your horse."

"Where is the Duke hurrying to?"

"Before the moon passes halfway of the sixth, I must hurry back to my secluded residence."

Chen Mu was surprised at this. "It is already the sixth and there are just then hours left. How could you possibly hurry back?"

Chu Beijie did not answer. He gathered the reins, tested the horse before bolting away.

Chen Mu didn't know the specifics of what was happening, but he knew that the situation was an emergency. As he watched Chu Beijie's back disappear rapidly into the distance, he grinded his teeth and stopped his vice.

"I shall go with the Duke and you lead the tired soldiers back to the capital. Give me your horse." Chen Mu mounted on it, brought down the whip and chased after the calvary soldiers.

A cloud of yellow dust blew into sky on the unpaved road.

The sixth.

Pingting, my birthday has already arrived.

The residence's atmosphere was a fog that prevented people from breathing.

The mountains and forests beyond remained covered in white. The moon had already retreated, while the a whisp of sunlight peeped out of the clouds, creating a heavy light that did not seem to lighten the tension.

Snowflakes had begun to drift down again.

Numerous and sparse, small bits of snow circled and helplessly trembled in the snow.

A light qin sound was not diffused by the snowflakes. It went beyond the wall, untouched like a rainbow on a cloudy, outcast day.

Pingting was touching the qin.

Now that the sixth had arrived, perhaps the surrounding soldiers with swords had become closer?

It was the sixth. That back view like a mountain and his hearty laugh full of heroism had been born on this kind of snowy day.

He was blessed by the Gods.

The Gods had given him a well-rounded life. He had a strong, healthy body, a straight nose, black pupils full of vigour and had innate dignity and self-confidence.

The Gods had created a rare entity known as Chu Beijie, so that she couldn't help herself but be distracted by him and be conquered.

Today was the sixth.

Pingting plucked a string with her thumb.

She had a deep, special bond with the qin. The qin was her voice, and she was its sound.

Only by letting her two hands softly pressing on the thin strings, could she close the troubles of her mind. She closed her eyes, carefreely, and immersed herself in her memories.

She remembered clearly, the vivid memories that surfaced.

The beating heart she had first felt through the curtains remained.

She seemed to have returned to the chase in the narrow valley. Chu Beijie had pressed towards her on his horse, wrapped his arms around her waist, stopped her, and waited for her reply.

His chest had been boiling warm, and his heart was jumping loudly, thundering against her ear.

And then, when he hadn't left, he'd held the bowl of soup, clumsily feeding her. He'd encouraged her to sleep, accompanied her while she watched the stars and moon.

Rivalry, anger, and gratitude, it was a sweet predicament and a heartbreaking

one too.

How could he not love her?

How could he break his promise and forget it?

How could he just cruelly leave her just for his unstoppable flow of heroic blood to protect his country?

Beijie, if Pingting is truly the most important person in your heart, then no matter how big the world is, what could possibly stop your movement?

I have buried a pot of Locked Away Goodies waiting for your return.

Zuiju stood at one side, her hands lowered as she quietly watched Pingting's back view. That back was very frail and weak, but her posture was straight. It seemed that a steel frame propped up the thin flesh.

Zuiju listened.

The sound of the qin was like a speech, as if reporting every single event that had occurred. Even if it was not a personal experience to others, they could empathise the grief behind it.

Yet in such a cold, chaotic situation, the tone remained clear.

Was the country or feelings more important?

Would one rather protect the universal feeling of love or protect one's own country?

Not daring to touch the matters in the heart was a fear like a needle posed high in the air which pierced at Zuiju's organs, causing a deep sorrow.

Humans were not inanimate objects and could not be heartless.

The thin strings had become a strangling weapon, torturing her until she broke into a cold, blood-like sweat.

No longer able to stand the piercingly harsh qin sound, Zuiju stepped forward, trying to restrain her emotions. She whispered, "Miss, you should stop. The lunch has been sent a while ago."

Pingting pressed her fingers onto the qin, causing the sound to suddenly stop. She lifted her head, her eyes bright as they flickered towards Zuiju.

“No matter what, at least eat a little.” Zuiju avoided her gaze and helped her up.

Hongqian deftly set up the dishes on the table.

Pingting scanned the table and her gaze stopped. She was shocked to realise that all sorts of different Gui Le dishes had been placed on the table, a variety of delicacies and ordinary dishes. She sat down on the table, squeezed to pick up something and then placed it down.

“All of these are Gui Le dishes personally made by He Xia.” Pingting was silent for a long time and opened her mouth once more. “He sure shows great determination.”

Her sense of danger pressed down on her heart, without barrier.

Hongqian could barely breathe in this heavy silence and boldly offered, “Although the residence is surrounded by soldiers, seeing the Marquess of Jing-An’s latest actions, I’d say that he remembers his old friendship with Miss Bai. Even if...” She was suddenly warned by Zuiju with a zip of her mouth and realised what she had said, immediately closing her mouth.

Pingting did not blame her. A bitter smile played on her lips as she said, “And how much heartfelt remembrance of old friendship is worth?”

It seemed that perhaps He Xia could accept anyone as the owner of Bai Pingting, except for one – Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie, the only person under the skies who could make He Xia feel afraid.

Chu Beijie, also the only person under the skies who could make He Xia feel jealous.

If the world was a battlefield, how could a contest between old enemies be limited to the smoke of the battlefield?

The snowflakes floated around outside the room. Occasionally one would follow the movement of the door curtain and crashed into the warm room, willingly melt into winter tears.

The head of the sun hung directly upwards, causing slight shadows eastwards.

A half of the sixth had already passed.

Just a half. Twelve hours left.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 36

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch36

He Xia was located on a high ledge of the mountain, gazing eastwards with his hands behind his back.

In the heavy snow, in the quiet residence underneath his eyes, hid a person called Pingting.

Pingting, his maid of fifteen years, his playmate, and music critic. She who accompanied him as he read, watched over his sword practices, and clapped while cheering.

Who could easily give up fifteen years? From cute little children to a well-bred lady, Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence was also one of Gui Le's two famous qin players. She had truly been a budding flower in the valleys.

So many people had looked out for her; so many people had praised her.

He had quietly protected, cherished and took her to all sorts of places like the battlefield. He took her to see the amoured calvary and the dancing sandstorms.

She was supposed to be his. In these circumstances, she was his.

But he'd never thought he'd be forcing her to stay.

His Pingting was a phoenix with brightly coloured wings who waited for a man of indomitable spirit to take her by the hand and from there, unite.

That was her wish, her happiness until the end of the world.

Only He Xia, rather than Chu Beijie, should have the greatest portion of Pingting's heart.

Yet the one who had stolen her heart was Chu Beijie.

It could be anyone, anyone apart from Chu Beijie.

How could he allow his Bai Pingting to be with Chu Beijie, his sworn enemy? How could she stargaze with him, talk about life with him, sing for him and play qin for him?

He couldn't accept it. His gentleness as he endured parting with Bai Pingting was exchanged for someone as cheap as Chu Beijie.

He could feel the snowflakes flying with the wind.

The sky was almost dark. It was already the sixth today.

"Master?" Dongzhuo walked to the high place and stopped ten feet behind He Xia.

"Dongzhuo, your voice is both heavy and sad." He Xia's voice became serious as he asked, "Do you think Chu Beijie will hurry back in time?"

"No."

"Are you upset that Chu Beijie is unable to hurry back?"

Dongzhuo shook his head, hesitating. He took his time before looking up and saying, "Master, please order us to attack. The residence has very little ability to defend and with Master's skill, it isn't difficult to capture Pingting alive. When she comes back with us, we can naturally persuade her to change her mind."

He Xia did not answer. His back, illuminated by the setting sun in the west, appeared very distant.

"Master, don't you feel any pity for her since we grew up together?" Dongzhuo had an unbearably sad feeling in his chest from watching He Xia's back. He knelt down and bashed his head onto the ground, crying, "Master, you know that Chu Beijie is unable to return, yet why do make Pingting's heart break by waiting?"

A dark light flashed in the depths of He Xia's raven-black eyes, a twisted pain that mercilessly surfaced. It quickly skimmed over his eyes and was gone.

"Not only do I need her heart to break," He Xia's eyes reflected the little dots

of fire over at the residence as he grinded his teeth, “I need her to lose all hope in Chu Beijie.”

As night fell on the residence, it became even quieter.

Even the outskirts of a graveyard could not be more silent. Not even the slightest sound of the snowflakes flying in the air could be heard. It seemed like an illusion to the eyes.

Like a dream. When one reached a hand, the dream dispersed, leaving emptiness.

Pingting watched the east.

Time was ruthless, slipping away little by little from her slender fingers.

She had been staring out there for a long time, not blinking at all, as if this was the most important thing of her life since birth.

The east was where Chu Beijie would return from. She could not see the main, straight road to the east since it was blocked by the mountain forests, where He Xia and his men were camped. Pingting did not worry. They could stop Chu Beijie’s progress.

Today was the sixth.

The moon had already risen, yet where was Chu Beijie?

Zuiju quietly opened the curtain. She had been standing outside the door for a long time, long enough to feel that the date of the sixth had been imprinted into her heart.

She approached Pingting, peeking at the beautiful and dignified, turned face in the moonlight. It sharply stabbed at her heart, causing her to momentarily lose her balance.

“Miss Bai...”

Pingting turned towards her and smiled. The collected smile was more heartbreaking than hysterical crying.

But this thing had become something that had to be said now.

Zuiju stared at her, not letting any hesitation into her eyes. She felt a cold

north wind sweep into her chest. It was cold enough to freeze her solid.

She thought her words carefully before opening her mouth. "Because of the death of the two princes, the King is currently without an heir. It would be good if the King's other concubines are able to give birth to a prince that can succeed the throne. If not, the Duke will one day become the owner of Dong Lin."

Just a few phrases sent Zuiju's chest heaving as if fearing that her own will was not strong enough. She didn't dare let her gaze waver and continued to firmly look at Pingting.

"Go on," replied Pingting in a light voice.

"If Miss' unborn child is a boy, then he will be the oldest son of the Duke."

"Zuiju," Pingting's eyes finally became serious as they rested on her face, "what are you trying to say?"

Zuiju stiffened and bowed her head in deep thought for a few moments. She suddenly bit hard on her lip, letting the bloody taste flow through her teeth. She lowered her voice, "Miss clearly understands that this child's identity is important to Dong Lin. He Xia is a formidable man, so Miss must not ever let the Duke's flesh and blood fall into his hand." Her words were straight to the point, no room for disagreement. She turned towards the bowl of warmed medicine on the table behind her and brought it to Pingting.

Pingting's gaze fell on the murky black concoction, and her first reaction was to take a step back.

"Miss, your child is very young, and the Duke does not know yet. You and the Duke are still young." Zuiju carried the medicine and took another menacing step.

Pingting's vision was suddenly blurred. She protected her lower abdomen and hurriedly took four or five steps back until she met the wall. As her backbone hit the cold wall, she managed to calm down. She stood up a little straighter, looked at the medicine and said, "By the end of the sixth, the Duke will definitely hurry back."

"And what if he doesn't?"

Pingting grinded her teeth, stressing each syllable, "He will definitely be back."

"But what if he really can't hurry back in time?" Zuiju hardened her heart, remaining ruthless.

The silence was choking, overpowering everything.

Pingting glared hard at Zuiju.

Her nails had dug into her palms, oblivious to pain.

Her eyes were no longer rippling gentle waves. They were more like flowing black mercury gradually solidifying into black stones. Her eyes were strong and decisive with the faint flickering of light.

"If he really doesn't arrive in time," Pingting lifted her white neck proudly, "and the moon passes half the sky, then I shall drink it."

Zuiju studied Pingting carefully, exhaling a deep breath.

She put the bowl of medicine on the table, knelt down and heavily thumped her head three times. She then went out the door, without saying another word.

The physician then stumbled into the side room, fell onto the pillows on a small bed and wept.

Chu Beijie was still wildly galloping in the darkness. The hills rolled past him, each one creating the illusion of the secluded residence that was still out of sight.

He didn't dare imagine what it would be there when he arrived.

Had the plum bossoms opened?

Was there still the bright timbre of qin?

Was there smoke?

Three thousand and seven hundred soldiers galloped behind him. One thousand of his original elites were too exhausted and had returned to the capital, leaving two thousand with Chen Mu's one thousand seven hundred soldiers.

Hundreds of horses.

The rumbling sound of the cavalry's hooves could be heard beyond the mountains and rivers.

The reins had already been dyed red from Chu Beijie's bleeding blisters.

He rode horses since childhood and bolted as fast as he could, employing every tactic he could. Shockingly there was someone who could ride even faster than him, who had ridden through the troop, reached his shoulders, faced the same cold wind asking, "Are you the Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie?"

Chu Beijie hadn't answered, just grinded his teeth and surged forwards.

He knew that this fresh horse was already tired. Although it was still galloping, it had slowed down significantly.

He couldn't deny it, it had slowed down. It made him anxious.

"Duke Chu, please stop for a while. I am from Bei Mo and have an urgent letter from Bei Mo's General Ze Yin..."

"Go away!" Chu Beijie growled. He had to hurry, hurry, not a single minute could be wasted and not even the tiniest drop of energy could be wasted.

That person was annoyingly persistent too. Perhaps it was because he had been looking for Chu Beijie for a long time and refused to leave him. He desperately followed him, the cold wind filling his mouth as he yelled, "The General has an urgent letter to give to the Duke. Because General was worried that the letter would not arrive by the time Duke left the capital, he wrote two letters. One was secretly sent to the Royal Residence, the other to me. I was asked to wait along the roads to the outskirts."

"Go away!" Chu Beijie glared at him, but rested his glare on his horse.

"Duke!" There was no way the man who dared to sneak into Dong Lin to deliver a letter to Chu Beijie would be afraid of death. He refused to give up, loudly yelling, "Please just read General Ze Yin's letter about Bai Pingting..." but his words were interrupted as his figure shook. Chu Beijie had already changed onto his horse midflight and grabbed the reins. His voice was serious. "Lend me your horse."

As expected of one of Ze Yin's best men; his skill was not bad. Although he had been suddenly pushed back by Chu Beijie, he twisted and bounced upwards,

successfully avoiding being thrown off.

With one hand holding the horse and the other extending into his pocket, he took out the carefully hidden handwritten letter of Ze Yin, quickly saying, "The one who murdered the princes was He Xia, not Bai Pingting. This letter is personally written by my General and can be used to prove Bai Pingting's innocence."

Chu Beijie's expression remained unchanged as he took it over, without looking before flinging it randomly.

"Ah!" The messenger yelled, looking as the letter he had delivered with so many hardships disappear into the rumbling torrent of cavalry soldiers. He stared at him and said, "You..."

"It doesn't matter whether she's innocent or not." Chu Beijie's eyes were decisive and his tone was serious. "Even if her tactics aren't wicked, she is still my Bai Pingting."

He then pushed him, forcing the messenger to jump off and roll safely to the roadside.

Chu Beijie now had a new horse that galloped faster and pulled away from the troops behind.

He was crazy with longing, drenched with worry and hellish torment. All this would only stop until he embraced that thin frame.

Dear Pingting, Chu Beijie admits his mistake.

Clever Bai Pingting, stupid Bai Pingting, kind Bai Pingting, evil Bai Pingting were all the Bai Pingting that Chu Beijie loved.

Forever and ever.

The moon came out.

In all of Pingting's memories, she had never seen such heartbreaking moonlight.

It gently shone on the world, casting the same pale light regardless of their pain or sadness, offering more depression.

“Let’s swear to the moon, never turn our backs on each other.”

Also under the moon, she had been delicate and charming, while he was gentle as water.

“Yes, from now on, you will be my Duchess and I will be your husband.”

“No.”

“I am only... a qin maid.”

“I like your qin.”

“I’m not good enough for Duke.”

“I’m good enough for you.”

“I’m not pretty enough.”

“I think you’re fine to look at.”

These words rang in her ears.

Do you remember, moon? On Mount Dianqing, Bai Pingting reached out, inch by inch, across the mountain of national hate, through the flames of war between the two countries’ armies and gratitude from fifteen years of upbringing.

She knew that she had crossed the flames, and she knew that she had spent fifteen of each season at the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

She knew that she had really stretched out her hand and crossed over the impossible mountain of national hate.

Was there really no place for feelings to hide in national pride?

Pingting shifted her gaze to look at the moon at the side of the sky.

The cruel moon had stealthily crept until it was nearly sitting on the branches of the forest trees.

Yet, there was still no movement from the east.

The sky slowly pressed down and the earth seemed to be as quiet as death, or simply everyone waiting breathlessly.

On the small table beside her, the black-coloured medicine had already

cooled.

The bright moon was heartless, the shadows too. She raised her head and saw the moon refusing to pause its pace. Little by little, it reached the tops of the trees.

Numerous bloodstains had been left on her lips from her teeth and her palm was slowly darkening from her pinches.

A sour taste swelled in her eyes, gradually heating, but she refused to let a single teardrop fall. She feared that when she cried, her nightmare would come true.

She stood by the window, her back straight, as if her backbone were made by a sword. She could only stand strong for so long. It seemed that she would no longer be supported with just the slightest movement. If so, she would crumble and be swept away by the north wind, not leaving the slightest trace.

“From today on, you mustn’t neglect yourself, nor harm yourself.”

She could not forget Chu Beijie’s words and could not forget the warm feeling that swelled in her chest when she looked into his deep eyes.

Why fear a country’s hate if there was true love?

If it was a genuine, stubbornly persistent love with respect, no matter the hundreds or thousands of twists and turns, one should never change their mind.

After all, what was more important than looking at the person you love every day and night?

Time continued to quietly trickle by.

Dear moon, I beg you, don’t disappoint me.

Just this once, in my entire life, please don’t disappoint me!

Her slender fingers clutched onto the cloth at her chest.

Yet the moon had no ears. Perhaps it heard Pingting’s voice but harshly ignored it.

There remained no sound from the east.

Desperation slowly flooded and penetrated her once sparkling eyes.

The moon had passed half the sky.

Pingting looked at it, directly above the trees, glowing its relentless light.

At that moment, she forgot that it was the sixth, forgot about the surrounding soldiers, forgot about Zuiju, forgot about He Xia and forgot her vows.

She forgot everything.

Everything was as empty as a hole. Her limbs were attached, but they were no longer supported.

There was only the sound of her heart cracking, slow and harsh, piece by piece.

Like a crystal lotus, its petals began to be torn ruthlessly until not one was left.

Broken.

Broken into a myriad pieces.

“Miss...”

Pingting slowly turned to see Zuiju’s very mournful expression.

Her gaze fell on the bowl of black medicine on the table.

Zuiju looked out from misty eyes as Pingting walked over, who then picked up the bowl. The bowl seemed to weigh a ton. The bowl trembled in her hands, causing strong ripples at its surface, spilling onto the sides and onto the top of the table. The silence in the room made the atmosphere even more suffocating.

Her heart.

The gentless had gone.

The joy had gone.

Only despair and pain remained in her eyes, churning constantly. Her eyes were wide as if watching someone slowly taking out her heart and liver.

Zuiju knew that she would never forget Pingting’s expression at that time.

Pingting brought the medicine to her lips and paused, as if she no longer had any energy left. The coldness touched her lips. She was reminded of the immense sense of loss she felt which made her shake, causing her hands to slip.

Crash!

The bowl broke into numerous pieces, and the black potion poured all over the floor.

The bitter tears she had forced back for so long finally rolled out like broken pearls from her trembling eyes.

Pingting fell to her knees, crumpling to a tight ball. Painful spasms ran through her body as her hands clutched tightly to her shoulders.

Her cries tore out of her soul, desolately honest, from her bloodied lips.

“Miss Bai...”

Zuiju sadly stroked her head but this seemed to shock Pingting even more. She suddenly looked up, her face full of tears. “Zuiju, don’t force me. Please, please, don’t force me like this!” she begged.

Zuiju felt like she was bitten by a snake and was reduced to touching Pingting’s hand.

Was this the romantic, joyful Bai Pingting?

That person who could go several days without food or drink, leisurely read on the couch and asked her, “Can you smell the scent of snow?”? That Bai Pingting?

No.

That romantic, fairy-like person had been ruined.

Ruined by He Xia, ruined by the King of Dong Lin, ruined by Chu Beijie and ruined by Zuiju herself.

This bloody world could not tolerate the proud, dedicated Bai Pingting.

She was there before her eyes but in reality, faraway. Just a gentle touch would cause her to disperse like smoke without warning.

The medicine she personally brewed was now stained to the ground, looking like a spill of thick black blood. Zuiju looked at the crying Pingting, her distressed heart.

She never knew that she could be so cruel.

Moran’s figure appeared at the door.

“He Xia has sent a carriage and is currently at the residence’s entrance.”

This was another heavy stone that pressed her scarred heart.

Pingting raised a hand, groping the wall to help her slowly stand up. She wiped her tears, her face deathly pale in the moonlight. She murmured, “I know.”

Oaths must be abided.

Moran’s face remained determined as he took out rope from behind his back. He tossed it to Zuiju whose face had yet to dry from the tears. He instructed, “Tie up Miss Bai.” This incredible command was shockingly delivered in a very firm tone.

“Moran?”

“Miss Bai, it won’t be because you didn’t abide by the oath, but forced by my abduction instead.” Moran’s hands were firmly pressed on the sword by his waist. “I promised the Duke that as long as I exist, you must exist.”

Chu Beijie had already pulled more than half a mile away from the rest of the soldiers.

He kept a close eye on the moon’s movement, scratched it deep into his heart. The higher the moon rose, the heavier his heart sank towards a knife that sent his blood surging out, unstoppable, with every movement.

But the hands held the reins harder, tighter. Sweat stained his heavy armour and the cold wind did not pause in cutting his handsome face and bloodied mouth.

The moon had passed half the sky.

Had already passed half the sky.

He raised his head, looking at the mountains in the west in the distance. The snow he saw there befittingly froze at his heart and lungs.

Wait for me Pingting!

I’m willing to give up all of the blessings I’ve had in this life.

I beg you to wait for me this one time.

I beg for a little longer.

From now on, I will never leave your side.

From now on, even country and family affairs cannot separate us.

From now on, I promise that in Chu Beijie's eyes, the most important treasure is only Bai Pingting.

Pingting, Pingting!

I beg you to wait for me a little longer.

Chu Beijie was exhausted as he zoomed into the mountains, his horse riding as fast as it could over numerous branches and shady trees until his figure began to emerge.

Beyond the mountain forest, lay the secluded residence.

The gallops sent the snow flying at his sides as he rode.

After the gloomy forest, where only patches of moonlight were filtered through the trees to fall onto the snow, Chu Beijie could no longer smell its fragrance beyond it, just the smell of gunpowder.

I am back!

Pingting, please look up, so that I can see your figure.

I'll swap my whole life for the two hours of my lateness.

Chu Beijie's expression did not waver, his hand tightened around the sword at his waist as he encouraged the horse to move even quicker.

The horse shot out like an arrow from the dense forest.

The secluded residence finally appeared in his sight.

Fire filled the sky.

The smell of blood floated in the night sky, more chilling than the sight of actual blood.

His limbs stiffened and his heart stopped beating from that moment on.

The cruel coldness penetrated to his bones.

With one final surge of courage he rode into the residence. Piles of bones, some familiar figures, all of them were young guards.

People who had trained day and night with him, troublesome but good natured, and people not afraid of dying.

Their four limbs had been cut off and their blood had become cold.

They had no regrets on their faces and beside every guard, there were always a few corpses of the enemy soldiers.

Chu Beijie stepped on the blood-soaked ground. He had been to battlefields hundreds of times crueller than this, but had never known such a vivid colour of blood that chilled his heart like this.

Pingting, Pingting.

Where are you?

He quietly whispered in his heart, as fearing a loud voice would scare away the slightest trace of life.

In the corner of his eyes, he found Moran.

Moran had bleeding wounds everywhere and a sharp arrow had pierced firmly into his right shoulder, nailing him to the ground. An enemy soldier's corpse was pressed against his belly.

He was still breathing.

"Moran? Moran!" Chu Beijie kneeled down, urgently calling him.

As if waiting for Chu Beijie's voice for a long time, Moran quickly opened his eyes, which he struggled to keep open. Until he realised that it was Chu Beijie's face, his sluggishness was replaced with obvious excitement. "Duke...you finally came back..."

"What happened? Where's Pingting?" His voice was solemn, "Where is Pingting?"

He stared at Moran, his sharp eyes were now trembling timidly. It seemed that just one word from Moran's quivering mouth was enough to cause the heavens and earth to crack.

"He Xia took her away." Moran breathed rapidly, twisting his face. He closed his eyes and summoned his remaining strength before opening them wide. He

spat out, "Chase after them!"

Chu Beijie immediately stood up and rushed out of the entrance.

He was greeted by Chen Mu and their fastest subordinates who had just arrived, but his feet did not stop. In a deep voice he commanded, "Put out the fire. Leave the medic and two hundred people to treat the wounded! The rest, follow me!"

While he spoke, he got onto the horse.

The horse seemed to be aware of Chu Beijie's overpowering confidence. It neighed loudly, readied itself and stood dignified on the snow.

He Xia, Yun Chang's He Xia.

Chu Beijie's directed his piercing gaze towards the direction of Yun Chang.

Pingting was there.

She was on the road leading to Yun Chang. At least another day and a half would be needed until they left Dong Lin territory.

Wherever Pingting was, even if it were the end of the world, it wasn't far at all.

"Duke!" Chen Mu hurriedly ran out from the residence, reporting, "There are a few enemy soldiers who haven't died yet. I woke a ranking soldier. He said they came along the Hengduan Ranges to get here and will most likely be going back the same way. There are quite a lot of them, a full eight thousand."

Perhaps Chu Beijie was paranoid, but he could feel the familiar sense of crisis. Chu Beijie calmed the maid down and returned to his usual calmness on the battlefield, "He Xia has probably not guessed that I have already returned to the residence. It's likely that they arrived in small groups and will return the same way, meeting up back at Yun Chang."

The thundering sound of the horses approached as the rest of the troops who fell behind had finally caught up.

Chu Beijie didn't wait for them to dismount, before pointing his sword in the sky, loudly saying. "Men of Dong Lin, Yun Chang has stolen the Duchess of Zhen-Bei. Do you still have the strength to chase on?"

The Duchess of Zhen-Bei?

Who dares to steal the Duke of Zhen-Bei's beloved woman?

There was a brief moment of silence, when a thundering answer that could shake mountains broke out from the gathering. "Yes!"

"They have eight thousand men and we only have three thousand weary soldiers who have gone without several nights of sleep." Chu Beijie's gaze slowly swept across the crowd of young men of Dong Lin. His deep voice resounded in everyone's ears. "If we can't get her back, you may die a worthless death so you may choose to chase or stay."

"Chase!" The thunderous roar was without hesitation. The echo that bounced back was enough to send the branches on the snow jumping.

Chen Mu also offered a few words of encouragement. He mounted on his horse and rode to Chu Beijie's side. His voice was firm, "No one feels intimidated when following the Duke. Please make your command, Duke."

Chu Beijie lowered his voice. "Let out all of the pigeons you have, so that the Dong Lin troops at the border can be aware of the Yun Chang army in the Hengduan Ranges. As He Xia dared to venture so deeply into Dong Lin territory, it's likely that he has many more troops apart from the eight thousand with him prepared for ambush on Yun Chang's border. Warn them to be careful."

After these commands, Chu Beijie raised his sword against the north wind, directing it at the sky. "Let's chase!"

"Chase!" The three thousand or so polished swords came out of the scabbards, gleaming the cold light.

It seemed as if thunder was crashing.

The sound of hooves seemingly smashing apart the earth sounded once more.

The cold wind once again greeted Chu Beijie's wounds on his face, but his eyes were full of determination.

I'll go to the end of the world, as long as you are there, Pingting.

It's not far at all.

As long as you are there.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 37

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch37

It was warm and comfortable on Yun Chang's carriage.

The blood soaked secluded residence was no longer in sight.

Pingting sat in the corner, looking out at the moon with no feeling.

From today on, the moon she loved the most no longer had its flawless gentleness.

It refused to say a word, reflecting people's breaking hearts and providing the light for the battle cries and the guard's expressions who had died a wasted death. He Xia pushed open the heavy door and kindly loosened the ropes around her. He then left, taking the gilded box with him.

She had stood on those young men's undried blood to reach the entrance of the residence.

Her white silk shoes were now as red as the fiery sunset, leaving bright red shoe prints in the snow.

Her heart was slashed by knives.

The blood all over the ground was no else's. It was hers.

It poured out from her heart, dripping onto the icy snow which the cold did nothing to soothe.

The carriage had been waiting in front.

White curtains decorated the finely cut window frame. The carriage body had been wrapped with splendid fabrics.

Zuiju had rushed out from an unknown place. She had red patches on her sleeves and her fingers were covered in blood as she threw herself at the foot of Pingting, saying, “Miss! Miss! Allow me to take care of Miss on the way!”

He Xia’s guards had already raised their shining swords, ready to attack.

Pingting turned around, looking at He Xia. “This is my maid.”

He Xia looked at the begging Zuiju and softened his voice, “Get on.”

Dear Zuiju, why bother?

Pingting leaned close to the window, listening to the sound of hooves. The sound of the wheel rapidly moved her inch by inch away from Chu Beijie’s place.

She did not feel pain, did not feel like crying.

She had decided to forget the pain and the tears, so she could forever forget that person’s voice and expressions.

She finally understood that true feelings were not actually that important.

National gratitude was a sea, and national hate was a mountain.

How could she be deeper than the sea or heavier than a mountain?

How could singing under the moon or playing qin amongst flower possibly compare to one’s own country?

The purest love in this world was not invincible and was no match for fame and power, no match for the dedicated and no matched against false national pride.

“As a maid, don’t you know that your Master is a famous general?”

“What famous general? He’s the one who decides what is more important and breaks other people’s hearts for his selfish needs.”

She thought about these words, and Bai Pingting smiled sadly.

Isn’t there a time where all people are a famous generals?

When even if they can’t decide what is more important, they go ahead and break other people’s hearts for their own selfish needs?

His choice was right, properly selected.

As a famous general, he should have gone ahead and put an end to the broken

heart, homeless and ruined soul he had created.

Until their promises, their smiles, were all forgotten.

A famous general.

As a famous general, he should have no regrets.

The wheels continued to turn rapidly, bumping along the road.

He Xia was eager to go home. He got Pingting and was riding towards home, not caring about the wind or frost that came at his way.

Was Yun Chang, the land hidden in clouds where his wife Princess Yaotian waited in that brilliantly decorated Royal Residence, his home?

If it wasn't his home, then where could he go?

Where was the former Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Neither He Xia and Bai Pingting could ever return.

Never could return.

A sense of loss ran through him, seeping into his bones. He Xia turned back to look at the carriage rolling behind him.

Pingting had returned, upset and broken. It was as if her soul had been lost but a residual of memories of the Jing-An Ducal Residence remained.

She was there, and her former self would return.

If she was there, then the He Xia that joked about the four countries with sparkly eyes and honour would exist.

"Master!" Dongzhuo suddenly alerted, getting He Xia's attention back. He rode from the troops from the front to He Xia. "Master, there are people blocking the road ahead. They say they would like to see Master."

A sharp light flashed in He Xia's eyes. He thought quietly for a while and held up a hand to stop the troops behind him.

The entire battalion stopped.

"Bring them over."

A man with his hands tied was soon pushed towards He Xia's horse.

“You wanted to see me?” He Xia looked down at him, measuring the tall man.

He wore the clothing of a scholar and was very thin. His voice and gestures were very calm as he studied the two guards beside him before looking at He Xia. He showed no sign of fear as he raised his head, “My name is Fei Zhaoxing. I have not slept for several days and have been waiting for the Marquess of Jing-An to pass on an extremely precious message.”

He Xia stared at him quietly, not asking him what the news was. His expression darkened and he harrumphed. His voice was cold, “How did you know I, Prince Consort, would come here?”

The guards by his sides raised their swords, poised and ready to fly towards him whenever he commanded them.

Fei Zhaoxing was not surprised and laughed instead. He looked at them warily, “Which of the four countries doesn’t have their own spies? Honestly speaking to the Marquess of Jing-An, even my Master had not guessed that Marquess would come here at this time, so my being here is merely luck. Besides, if Marquess is on this road at this time, then my news will not be of any importance.”

He Xia’s piercing gaze that could decipher intentions rested on the man and saw that he wasn’t lying. He Xia’s tone slowed down as he asked, “Who is your Master? What news do you bring?”

“My Master is Gui Le’s...” Fei Zhaoxing took a step forward, lowering his voice, “Queen.”

The cavalry unit continued to surge to the west, led by Chu Beijie.

Both horses and men were exhausted, but not one fell behind.

The moon seemed a little shy and quietly hid somewhere no one could see, while the sun had yet to show its face.

It was nearly dawn, but the sky seemed darker than ever.

“Go!” Chu Beijie was still galloping against the wind.

His hands and feet were almost num. He could only feel the burning cold touch of his metal sword against his waist as well as an overpowering desire.

Fresh blood, bones and sand.

Worry and grief filled his chest. He was eager to wave the sword and feel the rush of adrenaline when he made his enemy fall and kneel before Pingting, begging for her forgiveness and smelling the soft fragrance of her skirt.

The tip of the mountain ranges were now in Chu Beijie's sight. He rushed onto the summit, looking around at the unlit plains below. The winter sun began to rise slightly, causing everything to be coloured the same. The light flickered in his bloodshot eyes, causing it to look a little more energetic. He scanned his surroundings once more. A slight movement on the mountain ranges caught his eye.

Go!

In the darkness, the shadows were faintly flashing.

The breath left Chu Beijie.

His expression did not change as he drew his sword from its sheath. His pupils reflected his feverish desire to jump right in.

Chen Mu came forwards and followed Chu Beijie's gaze. He too, saw the flickering shadows. He had been a general for a long time and immediately understood the situation. He whispered, "It seems that they are small in number and are most likely troops He Xia left behind in case of ambush."

Now that Chu Beijie had seen traces of the enemy, his confident expression on the battlefield had returned. He whispered back, "If He Xia has left troops here, this means that the primary unit is indeed travelling the Hengduan Ranges."

When the primary unit safely passes through the Hengduan Ranges, the smaller units would immediately go catch up and meet up at a safe place.

"Rush towards them and leave a ranking soldier alive. Torture them until he says where the main unit has gone."

"Yes!"

The sword in his hand felt all too hot.

Yet his heart was even hotter than the sword.

Chu Beijie clenched the reins in one hand and stared at the familiar mountain ranges.

Pingting, are you inside these dense mountain ranges?

I beg you to return my gaze, just one moment.

This ancient land is silent for you.

These three thousand and seven hundred swords' cold reflections are flashing for you.

The most stupid and the most uncherishing Chu Beijie is coming for you.

As long as I see your smile, all of this man's warm blood will from thereon belong to only you.

The palm of his hand held the sword, drenched in cold sweat.

Chu Beijie turned his back against the mountain, slowly raised his sword as if piercing the bottomless darkness of the sky and spat, "Kill!"

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

The piece of earth began to shake.

The cold light of the sword began to shake as the battle cries raged.

The thousands of men and horses stormed down the hillside, cutting the silence of dawn.

The men in the forest had expected to defeat all enemies and had carefully prepared sharp arrows and various boulders and pits for traps. They hadn't expected three thousand and seven hundred furious-looking men charging towards them with such monstrous rage.

They did not fear injury or death. Their attitude was the colour red. The only light colder than the reflections of swords was the one in the depths of their eyes.

"Ahhh!"

A painful scream and Chu Beijie's surroundings were filled with relentless fighting. Perhaps it was like a drawing, as the colour of blood splashed slightly like the colour of plums as horses randomly trampled in every direction.

Nobody could resist Chu Beijie. All of the enemies were quickly defeated.

As the two sides clashed, the three thousand and seven hundred crashed through from east to west, wiping the enemies clean. When Chu Beijie's horse had arrived on the furthestmost point of the enemy camp, the battle was over.

Yet the fury was not.

This was the most brainless kind of attack, but at the same time it was the most time-saving.

The metallic smell floated around in the forest, drifting about.

This was not war, this was a massacre. The enemy troop had less than a thousand men. Most of them had already been buried under the pile of bodies.

The battle cries had replaced the thunder of hoove. The following silence dominated the silence of death.

Beads of blood trickled from the sword.

Chu Mu brought the man Chu Beijie wanted alive. Although the enemy was wearing civilian clothes, his general attire and the way he held himself was different to ordinary soldiers. How could such a man possibly escape the eyes of a war veteran?

The enemy with several wounds was pushed heavily before Chu Beijie's horse.

"Where is He Xia's main party?" Chu Beijie's voice was pretty faint.

It was not his tone that was intimidating but his eyes.

The enemy soldier was surprised for a moment and raised his eyes to look at Chu Beijie. He saw that the man on the horse was compelling, but all he could see was a faint outline in the dim light. "Which general are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Chu Beijie."

"Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei?" The enemy general was very surprised as he exclaimed, "You're the Duke of Zhen-Bei?" His face was full of bewilderment.

A passing hint of worry crossed Chu Beijie's eyes as he lowered his voice, "Are you not one of He Xia's men?"

"Of course not."

“Speak clearly!”

The enemy general decided to remain silent for a while. He thought a little, gritted his teeth as he submissively said, “I am in charge of defected troops and cannot complete my task anyway. I will be executed even if I return to my home country. Since it’s like that, I might as well propose a deal with the Duke of Zhen-Bei. I’ll tell Duke everything and can only beg you to spare my few remaining men alive.”

Not good...

Chu Beijie already knew that he was on the wrong track to finding the enemy. His heart was a mess, but his expression was even calmer. His voice was cold, “Speak.”

When the enemy general heard this, he immediately understand that his deal had been approved. He knew that he could take the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s word for it and he immediately replied, “I am the general of Gui Le’s Xiaoben Riding School, Zhao Wen. The King received a report saying that He Xia would be entering the Hengduan Ranges to abduct Bai Pingting. It was a rare chance, so the King ordered me to immediately hide and wait for them here so that we can ambush He Xia and bring Bai Pingting back.”

“The King of Gui Le, He Su?” Chu Beijie frowned, “How did he know that He Xia would be in the Hengduan Ranges?”

As expected, Zhao Wen had more to say. “According to the report, Yun Chang’s borders are closest to the Hengduan Ranges. They stationed a significant number of troops there, so how could one not possibly deduct that they are planning to return through the Hengduan Ranges?”

Chen Mu interrupted them, asking, “How many men do you have?”

“Nine hundred.”

Chen Mu’s expression was suspicious as he sneered, “With just nine hundred men, you dare to enter Dong Lin territory to pursue He Xia?”

“However, wouldn’t Dong Lin’s troops at the border detect us if we had too many men? My unit is Gui Le’s best at sneaking in, so we were able to slip into Dong Lin without detection. How on earth did we not meet with He Xia but the

Duke of Zhen-Bei's three thousand or so troops instead?"

Chen Mu could see that his words were honest and didn't seem to be lying. He asked a question in return, "Do you know how many men He Xia has?"

"Don't tell me it's more than one thousand?"

"A whole eight thousand."

Zhao Wen refused to believe him and shook his head. "Impossible, He Xia entered further into Dong Lin's territory than us. If he really has a troop of eight thousand men, then the Dong Lin army would definitely have been aware of him."

Chen Mu didn't have a moment of rest or time to think since seeing Chu Beijie on his way to the capital. Hearing Zhaowen's mentioning, he thought of his sudden transfer from the Dragon Tiger Barracks and felt his heart sink. He stole a look at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie's face was gloomy, his eyes both pained and sad.

The only remaining explanation was that the King of Dong Lin had plotted everything.

He had opened the entrance, letting the enemy abduct Bai Pingting – the woman Chu Beijie loved.

Chu Beijie refused to brood too much on this right now, as time was of the essence. He immediately asked the most important question, "As you have been waiting her for a long time, it seems that He Xia has still not gone this way, but we came from the direction where He Xia went. Where could He Xia and his men possible have gone, as this is the only path?"

Zhao Wen shook his head, "This is the only entry to the Hengduan Ranges and I can guarantee that He Xia did not come this way."

Chen Mu sighed, "The only explanation left is that He Xia changed his route."

Zhao Wen was upset by this. "If my King's report is without error, then the welcoming troops should only be placed at the end of the Hengduan mountains. If He Xia has changed his route, then he had either detected danger here or already knew that we were planning to ambush him."

“Having such knowledge is unusual. Like Gui Le, can’t Yun Chang have spies?”

Chu Beijie’s heart was as heavy as lead and considered why He Xia was so clever to change the route in advance. He unsheathed his sword silently, commanding, “Bury the dead and pack up, before resting three miles away from here. Let everyone have a good meal, and sleep well before setting out at noon.”

Chen Mu was surprised, “We’re not chasing any more?”

“And could we catch up?” Chu Beijie whispered a question instead, his heart sore. He secretly clenched harder on the reins, sending bursts of pain from his blisters. His voice was defeated, “We’re already on the wrong track so even if we head back, it’s already too late.”

Even if his horse could run a thousand miles an hour, by the time he caught up, He Xia would already be in Yun Chang territory.

When that time came, He Xia’s men would no longer be as simple as eight thousand.

Even if they were not yet in Yun Chang, it was three thousand against eight thousand. Unless one killed nine each, the chance of survival was very low.

Especially when they are in Yun Chang, the difference in their men was much greater three thousand versus several tens of thousands. What were the chances of breaking into the innermost core where He Xia and the upper ranks were? Even if his soldiers had two lifetimes and took down as many as they could, there was no chance of seeing that beautiful face before falling to his death.

Yet if he did not put up a fight, that qin sound would be forever lonely as she stayed imprisoned in another’s place.

He wasn’t satisfied.

How could he be?

“Duke...what does Duke plan to do then?” Chen Mu freed Zhao Wen and his remaining soldiers as promised. He turned back, looking at the suppressed heartache and resentment on Chu Beijie’s face.

“I’m going to go to the border to build an army.” The wind of dawn had arrived

and Chu Beijie's gaze was directed at the faraway Yun Chang, the corners of his mouth lifting without the coldness of regret. "I am going to use every drop of Dong Lin's military power to fragment Yun Chang's territory until He Xia brings back Pingting with his own two hands."

The woman whose fate was tied to his, the woman who used her qin to block his sword.

Pingting, with just a smile, you make my heart ache with your beauty.

I beg you to return my gaze, and just smile once.

Just one smile.

I will exchange the greatest bloodshed in history and the future, with the whole nation's power, for your smile.

The winter was almost over, but the coldness did not leave.

There had been drastic changes to the four countries' situation. After receiving the outskirts captured by the Dong Lin army, the King of Bei Mo immediately withdrawn his alliance with Yun Chang.

He Xia's purpose had already been achieved. He safely withdrew his troop of over three hundred thousand soldiers without any further battles.

The peasants still thought that the Gods were still compassionate and did not know about the thrilling activities at the border that caused so many people to be heartbroken.

People had settled in. Although the situation had been rather unexpected, they calmed down nonetheless.

The Royal Residence of Dong Lin received the news of the enemy retreating and the restless crowd who were unable to eat or sleep were relieved at last. However, before a grand feast could begin, more unexpected news came in like a thunderbolt from the skies.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie, had already used his command flag and was currently commanding all of Dong Lin's troops to pressure Yun Chang's borders!

The laughter in the huge residence faded to silence as the officials looked at each other in bewilderment, not knowing what to say or think.

Yun Chang was not like Gui Le or Bei Mo. This country had the resources for war but had always kept out of it, leading to a much more matured army. They were led by the widely acclaimed General He Xia and so it seemed like certain death trying to attack Yun Chang. Not to mention, how could Dong Lin possibly have enough soldiers to stop just the plots of Gui Le and Bei Mo?

How could the Duke of Zhen-Bei, who had always been cautious, do such an unwise thing that was no different from suicide?

“Is that true?” The cup of wine in the King of Dong Lin’s hand did not move as he looked at the dusty-looking messenger kneeling on the ground of the hall.

The songs stopped as the singing and dancing maids detected the dangerous atmosphere in the hall. They trembled at the side, their heads bowed as they kneeled.

The messenger had been hurrying for several days and his voice was hoarse. He still managed to muster up a loud voice, “Reporting to King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei issued his commands six days ago. All of the generals at the borders, along with the generals in charge of the four barracks have been ordered to leave and meet up with the Duke of Zhen-Bei.”

The King of Dong Lin said nothing and slowly turned to look at his pale-faced queen. He slowly settled the gold cup in his hands down, his gaze sweeping across the hall. “What do you think?”

When the Duke of Zhen-Bei had returned to the capital, the entire country celebrated, but several days later, he hurriedly left. Most of the officials did not know the details of Chu Beijie and Pingting’s relationship, so they did not dare open their mouths and all were silent.

A suffocating silence filled the huge hall.

The old Senior Official, Chu Zairan happened to think of something else. He opened his mouth to offer, “As the Duke has mobilised every border’s troops as well as the barracks, how many has he arranged to defend the Bei Mo and Gui Le borders?”

“He left a tenth of the original guarding troops at each border.”

Just a tenth?

The officials cried out.

At that level, defence was virtually non-existent. If the other two countries suddenly launched an attack, they could head straight to the heart of Dong Lin.

All of the eyes rested on the King of Dong Lin.

The expression on the King of Dong Lin's face was very ugly, his eyes flashing several times. He held up the cup of wine to his lips and calmly took a sip. "I would like to calm down, please all leave."

The officials stood in panic as they fell into their lines. They then bowed.

"Your loyal subjects shall depart!"

The kneeling dance maids and musicians also withdrew quietly and carefully from the room.

The real silence only came when the officials had departed. The hall was messy with the aftermath of a celebration, and the crowd had quickly scattered in silence.

The army had gathered at the border to challenge He Xia.

For his country, he sacrificed his own brother and sacrificed Bai Pingting.

Now, Chu Beijie sacrifices his own brother and Dong Lin for Bai Pingting.

What was the cause?

What was the consequence?

The King of Dong Lin sat on the throne, looking around at the huge hall, silently taking another sip.

A white hand stretched towards him, gently pressing down on the golden cup.

"King..." The Queen was by his side, her voice low, "Please, can King quickly think of a way? Use an Order to recover the command flag from the Duke of Zhen-Bei's hands."

The King of Dong Lin turned to her, looking at her in the eye. His smile was bitter, "Could Brother shift all of the troops without something like a command flag?"

The elite soldiers of Dong Lin hadn't hesitated to attack the capital and besieged the Royal Residence, under his command that year.

There were some people who were born with the ability to command and give courage to everyone.

"Even so, we musn't sit and turn a blind eye, King." The Queen's heart hammered painfully in her chest, "For just a Bai Pingting, he has put the entire nation's security at risk. What difference is the Duke of Zhen-Bei to a madman? What can he achieve by only caring about his own emotions and betraying the Royal House?"

The King of Dong Lin's deep gaze pierced beyond the door of the hallway, to somewhere faraway. "He has already done that."

He no longer cared about his life or death, about the Royal House, about his country.

For the first time, the sense of responsibility he had since birth had been replaced with vanity, without any hope for change.

For just a woman.

Just a Bai Pingting.

"Beijie, Beijie, are you still the Brother that would sacrifice everything for Dong Lin?" The King of Dong Lin slowly stood up, looking up at the sky, trying to seek its depths. Suddenly he felt a throb of pain at his throat he splurged out fresh blood onto the table, with a "gah".

"King!" The Queen yelled, her voice anxious. "Someone! Come!"

Servants immediately hurried over and were shocked to pieces by the scene they saw.

"King!"

"Careful, King!"

"Physician, call a physician!"

A gentle rain began to shower over the region.

From the ancient Royal Residence, bursts of sorrow and panic came.

The area before the throne had been dyed with blood bright red like the endless bloodshed of the guards in the secluded residence, no different to the liquid that dripped from the swords on a battlefield.

A country was a home and a home was made of people. The resentment lingered as thick as mountains.

Bai Pingting, what is not impossible for you?

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 38

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch38

Yun Chang.

He Xia was standing before the table, calmly rolling out the latest report from the army. He turned to see his wife.

“Don’t worry, Princess. The Dong Lin army has been subjected to a long period of war and have depleted forces. Yun Chang is completely fresh and has been prepared for a long time.” He Xia’s voice was relaxed. He smiled faintly.

Princess Yaotian gracefully sat down onto the table, studying her husband who just returned from a long absence. His face was as handsome as the first time she’d met him. His calm tolerance remained the same except for a little more invisible satisfaction in his expressions.

“Are we really going to war? During the alliance with Bei Mo’s forces, Prince Consort said that it was just a way to force the enemy to stop so they would realise my Yung Chang’s superiority without having direct clash with the enemy army.”

He Xia carefully studied the expression on Yaotian’s face. His softened his voice, “Is Princess afraid?”

Yaotian sighed faintly, “Chu Beijie is a famous general and Dong Lin’s army is at work. How could I not be afraid seeing so many Dong Lin troops camped at our border for so many days? Not to mention, even if Bei Mo is an ally to Yun Chang, what if they do not keep their promise and attack us while we are held up at Dong Lin’s border?”

“He Xia apologises for worrying Princess.” He Xia stepped forward and lovingly

touched his wife's face. His voice was attractive like a magnet as he whispered, "Please place all of Princess' fears and worries to He Xia. He Xia promises not to let Princess feel even the slightest concern."

The pendants of her heavy coronet worn at her forehead blocked a portion of the light in Yaotian's eyes. She straightened her neck and studied the depths of He Xia's eyes. The light shimmered in her own as she sweetly smiled, "With Prince Consort here, how could I worry?" She lowered her head but was stopped by He Xia's fingertips resting on her chin.

She couldn't help but involuntarily raise her head bit by bit alongside those fingertips. A warmth met her lips and the heat swelled. In one warm breath, he entered her lips and between her teeth.

The soft kiss gradually increased.

Yaotian was dizzy with the kiss, her blush spreading past her ears. She finally managed to wriggle away from He Xia, her heart anxious to jump out of her chest. She raised a hand and tidied the loosened strands, looking at a distant mirror where she saw that her ears had reddened. She gave He Xia a look of mock resentment and anger, murmuring, "Seriously, Prince Consort. This is the Royal Residence, not the Prince Consort Residence. If the maids saw this, how could I face them?"

He Xia heartily laughed, "Spare me, Princess. He Xia left Yun Chang too long and has dearly missed Princess so he became a little uncontrollable there." He lowered his voice, "Would you like to come tonight to the Prince Consort Residence? The Dong Lin army is currently assembling so I will have to leave for the border in a few days to deal with Chu Beijie. I don't know how long this battle will take and I have no idea when I'll be able to come back to see Princess."

Yaotian's ears were still steaming from his warm breath, and her heart was thumping crazily. She lowered her voice, "Isn't Prince Consort tired? You only returned late last night to the capital and entered the Royal Residence early morning next day. You certainly did not have a good sleep."

Their private room's air suddenly seemed heavy when they heard the slight sound of footsteps from the other side of the curtain.

A silhouette appeared and stopped behind the curtain. Luyi respectfully said, "Report to Princess, the Senior Official would like to see you."

"Welcome him in." Yaotian instructed. She turned to look at He Xia, her smile like honey. A frown was spread on her well-groomed eyebrows. "It's all Prince Consort's fault for making my face so red. What will the Senior Official think now when he sees me?"

"Just let him see you. How could a wise man such as the Senior Official not understand the relationship between a husband and wife?" He Xia gently laughed and went over to her. He whispered, "Princess hasn't replied to Prince Consort whether she will come to the Prince Consort Residence."

"Seriously, you..."

"The pain of longing."

No matter how handsome the man, once they are free, they were monkeys women couldn't deal with.

Yaotian was both angry and amused. She sucked her lip, "Since Prince Consort has returned, then I shall visit Prince Consort's residence with excitement. But what would the officials think of my going since Yaotian is a girl? It seems...that I'd better find two beautiful, personal maids for Prince Consort." She glanced slyly at He Xia.

He Xia's expression did not change as he continued to smile while asking, "Then tonight, shall I prepare alcohol and desserts in the rear courtyard of the Prince Consort Residence?"

Yaotian hid her smile and returned his gaze. She stretched out her white hands, nudging his shoulder softly. "The generals are still waiting to report to Prince Consort. Go see them. Be careful not to bump into the Senior Official or she'll whine on and on to Prince Consort."

He Xia good-naturedly softly pinched her on the cheeks before taking a step back. He adopted a joking expression before he left, half-singing as he posed a bow, "Wish you the best, Princess."

The curtain lifted loudly. Gui Changqing happened to walk in and saw him as he turned onto the porch.

“Prince Consort.”

“Senior Official.”

They respectfully nodded to each other as the two passed each other. Gui Changqing turned and watched He Xia’s back view, full of confidence and strength. He stayed silent before entering through the bead curtains through the innermost section, greeting Yaotian.

“No need for excessive politeness. Please have a seat, Senior Official.”

Luyi served up the tea specially prepared for Gui Changqing. Gui Changqing took it and drank a mouthful before raising to look at Yaotian’s face that could not conceal the sweet joy she felt. He opened her mouth and laughed, “No wonder all the officials say that one can easily deduct whether the Prince Consort is in the capital from the Princess’ expression.”

Gui Changqing had been serving for many years and had watched over Yaotian as she grew up. He was like a father to her. Her laugh made her feel indignant, “Even Senior Official is making a joke out of Yaotian?”

Gui Changqing adoringly looked into her eyes and restrained his laughter. He changed it for a serious tone as his voice serious, “Has Princess told Prince Consort yet?”

At this question, the smile suddenly disappeared from Yaotian’s face.

“Yes.” She slowly sighed, frowning, “He isn’t worried about the massive gathering of Dong Lin soldiers at all and has no intention of giving up Bai Pingting to stop the war.”

“Princess, if we really do clash with Dong Lin, the opposition will be led by Chu Beijie. Our army will be led by our Prince Consort, resulting in great loss to both sides. There is not the slightest benefit for my Yun Chang.”

“What can I do?” Yaotian frowned, “When talking about Dong Lin’s army, the Prince Consort didn’t even mention Bai Pingting’s name, suggesting that he clearly does not plan to settle things peacefully with Chu Beijie.”

Gui Changqing didn’t say anything. He moved the lid off the teacup and studied the ripples inside. He let Yaotian to rest her gaze on him for a long time

before placing the teacup back onto the table with both hands. “Princess fell into Prince Consort’s trap. Sending out the main army and adventurously approaching the Dong Lin border was to simply sever Chu Beijie’s ties to the Royal House and therefore break them from using Bai Pingting.” He paused and looked at Yaotian.

“Please continue, Senior Official,” Yaotian replied.

“Judging from Chu Beijie’s lack of grasp on the overall situation and his sudden preparations to attack Yun Chang, it is highly likely that he is no longer working alongside the King of Dong Lin, meaning our goals have been reached. Bai Pingting’s value has been lost too. It will do more harm than good for Prince Consort to continue to hold onto Bai Pingting.”

“Ss...”

“Princess must not only be careful with the future but also the present.” Gui Changqing looked squarely in Yaotian’s eyes, lowering his voice, “The Prince Consort has currently arranged Pingting to live at his residence. I heard that in addition to instructing his servants not to let her leave, they were also told to treat her with the etiquette deserving of a mistress.”

The pendants on Yaotian’s coronet shook slightly. She avoided Gui Changqing’s gaze, pondering in silence.

Some time passed before Yaotian faintly replied, “Understood.”

As Gui Changqing left, Luyi came in to report, “Lunch has been prepared.”

“I’m not hungry; tell them to take it away.”

She dismissed Luyi and other maids in the room. She sat in the room alone, head bowed while deeply thinking in silence. Multicoloured lights scattered from the jewel curtains. They swayed with the wind, occasionally knocking into each other and resulting in a clear sound.

Yaotian raised a hand and took off the coronet on her head. She held it in her hand and studied it briefly before putting it on the table. She removed the few remaining ornaments from her hair, letting her jet black hair spill down, covering her shoulders. She looked into the mirror. It seemed that her face had become a little sharper, emphasising her beauty.

She lifted the corners of her mouth to the mirror, testing out various smiles, each pretty in its own way. Yaotian laughed and placed the mirror on the table. “Luyi!” she called.

Luyi hurried from the porch. “I am here, what would Princess like?”

“I want a bath.”

“Yes, I will send orders to get it ready.”

A hint of relaxation was in Yaotian’s voice from behind the curtain. “Sprinkle some fresh petals of the qixiang flowers from the snowy mountains.”

“Yes.”

As Luyi replied, Yaotian seemed to have another thought, thinking, “What is the name of the rouge that Histogrammer Houcheng presented me on my birthday last month?”

“Answering Princess, it is known as Fangniang, and is made from the petals of a very rare flower. The powder is very thin and evenly applies onto the face. The official that brought it up said that it could make your skin as soft as a new born child.”

Yaotian listened carefully, and replied “Hm”. She then instructed, “After the bath, bring the Fangniang so that I may try it.”

“Yes, Princess.”

These commands were enough. Luyi went to prepare everything as wanted. Yaotian got up out of her seat, looking down at the long, bright, red-purple dress of a princess.

This was a dress specially tailored for her by Yun Chang’s best tailor. There were several flowers and birds on it that kept dozens of the Royal Residence’s seamstresses busy with embroidery for a whole month. The sleeves were very long. Silver-purple tassels hung at the edge from her feet, completing the look. It could not be more expensive or intricate than it was.

Excitement and pride flashed in Yaotian’s inky black eyes.

The two most famous generals in the world, the Marquess of Jing-An and the Duke of Zhen-Bei, would now compete.

She herself was the Princess of Yun Chang and was already He Xia's wife.

Yet how did the Bai Pingting capture Chu Beijie's heart?

Zuiju was the one who knew best what Bai Pingting looked like at the moment.

The two had come empty-handed and only had two changes of clothes. The way here had been bumpy. They were both tired and dirty. When they arrived at the Prince Consort Residence, everything seemed to have been prepared a long time ago. No instructions were needed to call everyday items since they were all within reach."

Pingting's bronze mirror laid at the table alongside the comb she used back at the Ducal Residence. She had a large closet of neatly folded clothes, all the colours that Pingting liked not a single error.

There were a few cases near the table. One had a guqin in it and another had an agate bowl full of small multicoloured pebbles that one could easily mistake for jewels.

The house was soaked with incense, carrying warmth, but was not stuffy.

A vase stood on the windowsill, filled with freshly cut white plum blossoms. A few unopened buds had been placed next to the blooming flowers.

It was so perfect that it was chilling.

It felt as if Pingting had lived there for a long time. It was even more chilling seeing Pingting appear to want to be there, wanting to live there forever.

He Xia had headed to the Royal Residence early in the morning, leaving behind two caged birds that were familiar with the new environment.

Pingting was in the back of the building. Her face no longer had the extreme distraught expression she had when the moon passed half the sky, ending the sixth.

The expression that replaced was one of lazy leisure.

This strange leisure made Zuiju feel unable to be close to her.

Zuiju stood across the corridor, looking at her straight back. She knew that her insides had already snapped, yet couldn't understand why she was able to stand so straight like that.

She sighed softly.

She couldn't understand it, but apart from Bai Pingting herself, who else could?

Zuiju sighed a few more times. She wasn't that far away from her. She could see her face clearly but couldn't see her heart.

Across the corridor, Zuiju's sighs seemed to bring another onset of unstoppable tears. She cautiously raised her hands and wiped the corners of her eyes. Pingting turned to her, beckoning anxiously.

Zuiju was stunned by this.

Ever since Pingting had spilled the medicine, fell to the ground and cried, she had become something soulless, a puppet or simply something inscrutable. She wouldn't say a word, and there was no distance in her eyes. Zuiju hurried forwards, as she hadn't seen such an energetic action from Pingting for such a long time.

Even though it was just a gesture, it was enough to bring joy.

Zuiju quickly walked through the corridor, hurrying to Pingting's side. "Miss Bai, what's wrong? Do you have any orders? Do you want to eat something?"

Pingting shook her head. She looked around to see if there were any outsiders watching before whispering, "It's kicking me."

The tiniest, almost-invisible gentle smile escaped from her pale face.

After several days of desolate grief and despair, this smile was the most beautiful Zuiju had ever seen in her life.

"Movement already?" Zuiju frowned and said, "You must have mistaken it, Miss. It's not that old and it shouldn't be able to kick at its current age."

"There's no mistake." Pingting bit her lip, "It really is moving." The slightest movement at that instant reminded Zuiju of the beauty that had impudently messed around in Chu Beijie's arms.

An unexpected memory.

The first memory without sorrow that had come to mind after that desperate

night.

The scent of plum blossoms had been scattered throughout the secluded residence after the burial of the Locked Away Goodies. Hongqian had ran off to somewhere unknown like usual while the guards stood, occasionally nodding and chatting. Moran's expression was distant as usual, but he was a good-hearted, caring and gentle man.

The matrons in the kitchen sent meals over every day, affectionately offering a few complaints. They'd take away the food containers with satisfaction when seeing that Miss Bai had enjoyed the day's meal.

Chu Beijie's figure was also there, and Bai Pingting's heart was there too. She would play qin and he'd quietly stand at one side. Raising his head, his eyes had a look of pleasure and love that would not separate them.

All set against the snowy backdrop, it was picturesquely beautiful.

Looking back now, Zuiju realised that that period of living in the secluded residence was something truly precious.

Slender fingers waved in front of Zuiju's eyes, and she came back to earth. "Ah...Miss..." she said.

"I can't stay here." Pingting's voice was soft, full of determination.

He Xia must not know about this child.

But the two were currently imprisoned. How could He Xia not realise that Pingting's stomach had been growing day by day?

"Miss, the Duke will definitely come save us quickly."

Zuiju regretted it the moment the words left her lips.

Pingting's expression was like someone thumping down heavily on a river, stiffly frozen by winter, causing it to completely shatter.

She turned away and sat down on a stone bench of the courtyard. She lowered her head, not letting Zuiju see her expression. It was a while before she slowly said, "Zuiju, I beg you..."

Zuiju self-criticised herself for her loose tongue and hurriedly murmured,

“Zuiju was wrong, I won’t mention that person in front of Miss again.”

Pingting then looked up at Zuiju and it was several moments later when she slowly raised her hands to her.

Zuiju took them and kneeled, raising her head. “Say no more, Miss. Zuiju understands.”

The two slender white wrists grasped each other, gripping tighter and tighter.

The snow whirled; the flakes fell like tears.

The guqin of the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence had been damaged. The large palm that stroked her black hair no longer had its warmth.

One remained as the world’s precious sword that seemingly destroys, while the other became the red soul that swirls around the cold moon.

After the moon passed half the sky, her soul had been torn out of her bones and reduced to ash.

“One day, you will know what an excruciating heartache is.”

She already knew.

She knew from that moment.

The pain was not without reward as at least she had a little life in her belly. There was still one, in this thin body and broken heart.

Its heart may be small, perhaps not yet formed, but when it began to jump vigorously, it was something no one could stop.

“No matter what, prioritise protecting the child first.” Zuiju softened her voice, “Miss was subject to such a bumpy ride, through great anxiety and sadness. Now you must open up your heart and sleep well. I’ll get them to stew some rich medicine.”

“Absolutely not.” Pingting objected, “He Xia is proficient in medical knowledge too. He’ll immediately understand from whatever you prepare. The most important thing right now is to quickly leave.”

Zuiju’s eyes brightened, “Has Miss already thought up of a plan?”

Pingting’s eyebrows fell to a frown. She shook her head lightly. “He Xia is not a

normal person. It won't be easy if we attempt to leave from his supervision..."

"Then..."

"We have to think of a plan." Pingting's eyebrows turned away, suddenly resting on the stone table underneath her hand.

On the side of the stone table, there were small words carved onto it – "Prince Consort Residence".

The Prince Consort Residence of Yun Chang's Prince Consort.

He Xia's military influence in Yun Chang was all thanks to the two words of his title, Prince Consort.

Pingting carefully looked at the inscription. She released her tight frown. She sighed and mumbled to herself, "I wonder what kind of person the Princess of Yun Chang is like..."

From the rumours, the Princess of Yun Chang's name was "Yaotian".

As heavenly, dignified and beautiful as the spring flowers.

When she was still young, while studying with her Master, they had occasionally gone outside the residence to try new things.

They often went to Prince He Su's Residence.

There they had often encounter the brothers of the Royal House laughing and chattering. Occasionally they would gossip about the affairs of Yun Chang's Royal House and the general consensus were the same – they were pitiful.

Rumours had it that Yun Chang's Royal Residence had the least number of beautiful residents in the Royal Residences of the four countries. Even the King and Queen were unable to be publicly affectionate. The only place in the entire Royal Residence where they could be together, was the Queen's private quarters.

But when they were out of the little nest, no matter how intimate they were, they had to part ways and sit in their own respective sides.

"Pitiful, just pitiful. No wonder the King of Yun Chang only has a daughter."

"With those conditions, they're fortunate to even have a child."

These noble's children only understood a little of the society of adults but said the words loudly, tutting and sighing as they thought of their own, well-developed, open Gui Le. As long as the water filled their own cans, they were able to boldly shout out their feelings without a care for the rest of the world.

“The Princess sure has an unlucky life. In our Gui Le, when the Princess married, she could live in the Prince Consort Residence. The married couple are together everyday and can do whatever they want. Yun Chang is very different though. Even when the Princess marries, she remains in the Royal Residence, and only when she wants to watch the snow, flowers or moon, can she contact the Prince Consort and talk the night through.”

“Ha! Wouldn't everyone know how many times she goes per month? Just count the number of times the Princess' carriage comes.”

Pingting had stood by her Master, listening to their reckless remarks, embarrassed early on. She would then tug at Yangfeng, find a lush green willow tree in the courtyard by herself, choose a rock to sit in, and chat about girly things.

The past could not be recovered. Looking back now, everyone had changed.

Pingting was helpless, she had to look forwards. The Master who had chuckled softly about the pitiful Yun Chang Royal House was now the owner of Yun Chang's Prince Consort Residence. How were their relationship? One was a Prince Consort from Gui Le and the other was Princess Yaotian who had stayed so deep inside her Royal Residence.

It seemed the time He Xia lead the troops to the border and into Dong Lin, surround the secluded residence and return from the battlefield with the loots of victory was worth several days of separation to the Princess.

Even if it was a short separation for a wife and husband, they were still newlyweds.

Did they miss each other?

If it was that person, he'd come back after a day. With a strength never seen before, he would force his way and cause several nights of chaos, forcing kiss after kiss despite her begging.

That person...

A pain jolted her heart, a barbed arrow that had already been embedded suddenly raging after being forgotten for so long. Pingting suddenly came back to her senses and used her fingers to pinch at her tender skin.

Don't think about it.

You musn't think about it.

Never think about it again!

She breathed in deeply, forcing the thoughts back to the three words, "Prince Consort Residence."

He Xia hadn't been in control of the military power for a long time and had yet to secure his status. He was definitely still trying to make his wife happy the best he could. The Marquess of Jing-An who had lost his home and place in Gui Le's government had suffered enough. He undoubtedly understood the significance of the Princess' support.

He Xia would use all of the tactics he could to capture the Princess.

Where else but the first night upon returning to the capital be spent?

Pingting was silent for a long time before turning to Zuiju. "Did He Xia enter to Royal Residence this morning to see the Princess?"

"After his bath, he carefully dressed before leaving. He probably went to see the Princess." Zuiju thought for a little. "Of course he had to hurry to see her. No matter what, the Princess is the master of Yun Chang."

She then saw the deep pondering expression on Pingting's face whose eyes revealed a hatching plan. She then frowned as if some point was bothering her. Zuiju tentatively asked, "Has Miss thought of a plan? Is it something to do with the Princess?"

Indeed, it seemed that Pingting had encountered a problem through her thinking. She slowly shook her head and stared at Zuiju, thinking deeply again. She then said, "Do you have any prescription that can temporarily change my pulse so that He Xia wouldn't know the truth when he checks? Just one night is enough." She knew medicine well herself and knew such a task was difficult to

achieve.

What herb could be effective but not harm the child in her belly? Since they were in captivity, whatever Zuiju wanted had to be approved by the Prince Consort Residence, meaning that He Xia would not suspect it.

Zuiju replied, "Is Miss testing my medical knowledge? Even my Teacher would not know, not just I."

Pingting didn't have much hope in that either. Her face remained sad. In a low voice she said, "This is the most important step. If we don't think things through, then we will not be able to escape so easily."

The corner of Zuiju's lips suddenly lifted into a sly smile. "Although there is no such prescription, it's not like I don't have other methods. Give me seven silver needles. I promise, by tonight, He Xia won't detect Miss' fetal pulse."

"Acupuncture?" Happiness danced into Pingting's eyes.

Huo Yunan, Dong Lin's genius doctor, specialised in acupuncture.

"However, it can be only done once. If done too many times, it will not be good for your fetus." Zuiju's words were frank, "Also, after the acupuncture is done, your pulse would not be as calm and regular as usual but slightly disordered."

"That's even better!" Pingting quietly clapped a hand onto the stone table, the white and black of her eyes contained about thirty percent of its original light. She lowered her voice, "I need He Xia to think I'm sick."

"But the silver needles..."

"The silver needles are the easy part. He Xia has commanded the people of the Prince Consort Residence to treat me like a mistress." Pingting's eyes slowly turned and rested on the two probing maids standing across the pond. "If I tell them to get some, would they dare not to?"

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 39

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch39

The snow had just stopped when He Xia returned to the Prince Consort Residence.

He had just arrived late last night yet had to leave early next day to see the Princess in the Royal Residence. He then had to meet with the generals to discuss plans about Dong Lin. His iron-like body couldn't help being a little tired.

His eyes rested on the Prince Consort Residence before him, majestically magnificent but a little lacking in activity. Since coming back from the Royal Residence, he felt a little more attached to it but at the same time, unwillingness and fear.

This attachment and fear was all because of one person.

Pingting was there. His eyes often flickered to the colours Pingting liked and wore. He zoned in on frequencies that resembled Pingting's breathing.

She always unwittingly affected others with just one breath, capturing their heart. She herself would remain lazily and leisurely, utterly oblivious to herself and others.

But He Xia was the exception.

Thanks to their deep bond of fifteen years, He Xia was able to affect Pingting with his breath, capturing Pingting's heart. Pingting would notice whenever his expression wasn't right, his body feeling uncomfortable or his emotions a mess. Those two clever eyes would softly roll around twice and would have already deducted what was wrong. She'd then carefully plan out something to help him, whether it be strolling around the gardens, playing the qin or cracking a joke.

Occasionally if he was still unhappy after persuasion, he would pick up his sword and begin a sword dance. Pingting would then specifically change into a dress with extra large sleeves to accompany in the slow and gentle “Nine Days” dance.

As the two connected, the misery became a blooming flower.

Not many men under the skies were blessed to have such a time.

This blessing belonged to He Xia, once.

It was only when Pingting’s eyes had moved on from He Xia. He was shocked to find that Pingting’s gaze was a valuable treasure.

It was not the qin sound or the singing, not the touching dance, not the charming laugh. It was her fine assurance that was most precious.

The skies had decided that the blessing he had been given was to be removed one day.

How could he obediently hand the blessings he once had to Chu Beijie without a fight? That Duke was an enemy country, the one that had set plans with fake retreats, the Duke of Zhen-Bei who provoked He Su to drive out the House of Jing-An, the man who left the Precious Parting Soul Sword behind and the man who stole Pingting.

The footsteps he took up the steps were somewhat slow.

The threshold at the door was very tall. It was the threshold to his Prince Consort Residence, yet it seemed that if it were any taller, it would block the door and become a sturdy prison.

He willingly came in, but that didn’t mean he was willing to stay inside forever.

He Xia lowered his head and looked at the indentations his sword had left on his palm. His hand were full of strength and flexibility. He knew how to cleverly pick, cut and puncture his way to victory.

The four countries were now in chaos.

Chaos was a hero’s playground.

He was born a general and born into the House of Jing-An, giving him a

superior identity to observe the situation of everything. He was a born genius, one who should sit at the top, above all.

But another person had come into the picture Chu Beijie, also of noble blood. He too was talented with words and strength, another savior of his country who was also able to carefully lead his troops with warrior-like strength.

He Xia and he were just like Gui Le's two famous qin players, Yangfeng and Pingting. Their names were linked together for their whole lifetimes.

Yangfeng and Pingting were friends from childhood.

Yet those two were destined enemies.

Pingting had returned, and Chu Beijie could not have her. Just like Pingting, Chu Beijie would never get his way forever.

A flash of colour suddenly appeared before He Xia's eyes. He lifted up his foot and strode through the door of the Prince Consort Residence.

He hurriedly entered through the atrium and turned the corridor towards the pond, when he stopped before a stone wall. He Xia turned and looked at the figure in the pavilion across him.

There was a table in the pavilion. The guqin had been set up on it and the incense beside it had been lit. Pingting was seated in front of the guqin, silently stroking the head of the qin. It seemed as if she was trying to wipe off traces of contaminating sweat until it was all carefully erased.

Seeing this, He Xia deeply remembered that it had been a long time since he last heard Pingting play qin.

He had always been the one seated the closest, watching beside her. Her indescribably beautiful hands lightly struck chords onto the ancient qin, trembling slightly. The qin would then spit out a wonderful sound, sometimes like an arrow that stopped the wind as it shot straight towards the sky.

Even the clouds couldn't help parting.

It had been so long since he last heard Pingting's qin sound.

He didn't dare alarm Pingting and quietly leaned on the wall of the stone shelter, anticipating the familiar qin sound to begin. The sound that appeased his

weary heart, pointing out the direction of home.

Pingting didn't seem to be ready to play qin. She just had her head lowered as her fingertips repeatedly stroking the guqin. Perhaps she had a dim light of thought, perhaps not, but her fingertips stopped briefly on the thin string.

The incense elegantly burned on, its dark red light flickering. Gradually, it dimmed, flickered a few more times stressfully and went out.

"Why are you not playing?" He Xia walked out from the stone shelter, stepping on the few bricks placed on the snow until he stopped before the pavilion.

Pingting seemed to not hear him, just continued to stare at the qin.

"This is a qin I specifically sent someone to buy from Gui Le. Do you like it?"

No matter how kind his words were, there was no reply.

Since getting on the carriage, Pingting had never spoke another word to him.

Her person had returned, but her heart had been left forgotten at Dong Lin.

After a while, He Xia sighed. "Order whatever you want from the kitchen. There are two Gui Le chefs in this residence and are particularly good at making garlic pork and pickles." He had planned to return to his room after saying this. After taking several steps away, he turned back, "I haven't heard your qin sound for a long time." His voice was soft as he turned back, ready to leave once more.

"Me too...haven't seen Master sword dancing in the snow for a long time."

A very faint, almost inaudible whisper came from behind.

He Xia turned around in surprise, his eyes flashing with joy as said, "Do you want to see it?"

Pingting avoided his eyes, faintly sighing. "Isn't Master tired? You came back late last night and left early next morning."

He Xia stared at her, touched. His lips revealed a doting smile, "How could I be tired with you watching me?"

His sword gently came out of his scabbard like a dragon entering water, smoothly gliding in and shedding its dirty half which floated on the water like a quilt.

It seemed that the blade could cut the clouds till they spilled water or quickly beckon the lightning towards them.

Pingting remained seated at the pavilion, silently watching.

Her eyes were like watery smoke. When He Xia gazed into them, all of his tiredness corroded and melted away.

He Xia's sword leapt freely into the sky. Its spinning was closely followed by Pingting's eyes.

In that moment, it seemed that the cozy Jing-An Ducal Residence had been brought back.

Nothing had changed.

His father and mother, his home and his determination to protect all of them were there.

The days had not passed; the seasons had not changed, and death was non-existent.

He Xia's sword swung, easily waving back the heavy imprints of his past.

The freezing north wind was unable to stop He Xia's pride after finishing the dance. He was soaked in sweat as he used his sleeves to rub his forehead. He laughed, "Again!" The sword began to float up again, suddenly stopping. Its style appeared to change. It was a dragon, ready to take off to the skies. It had been Pingting's favourite Jing-An sword technique back then.

Ping!

As the dragon of the sword walked in the four directions, an unexpected qin sound began to ring, momentarily jolting the sword.

He Xia was delighted by this. His actions continued without pause. He turned, the sword's direction changing once more. The qin sound became louder like the call of a dragon but higher pitched.

The sword danced to the qin with the greatest accuracy, flawless.

After the entire set of Jing-An sword techniques had been danced, Pingting entered with the finale, "Nine Days."

At the final cut of the sword, the qin sound stopped too.

Two pairs of deep eyes clashed in midair as the complex yet familiar feeling came crashing back.

Dear Pingting, you're the same as me, unable to forget the past.

Your heart still has the Jing-An Ducal Residence, still has the Marquess of Jing-An!

Apart from Chu Beijie, there is no one else who can shelter your heart, right?

You're still the same!

On the white world, silence suddenly fell.

No one knew how long before the the gazes in the air separated. Pingting's pupils shifted until they rested on the ground beyond He Xia.

He Xia seemed to notice and turned back.

An elegant figure jumped into his eyes.

Yaotian was dressed in a gorgeous grand purple dress, coupled with a pure white mink coat that draped over her shoulders. Her complexion was like pearls. A complex coronet had been placed on her head. Several gemstone necklaces had been put tightly around her neck.

Her lips were cheery red; her eyes were as bright as stars.

Eight maids had their heads lowered, attending behind her.

He Xia turned around, Yaotian smiled. She praised, "This is the first time I have seen Prince Consort dancing in the snow." Her gaze shifted beyond He Xia. Her voice was soft, "As expected of one of Gui Le's two famous qin players. I have heard of your fame, Miss Bai."

"Princess." Pingting's jade hands had left the qin as she slowly stood up from her chair, leaving the pavilion. She bowed at Yaotian who was standing behind the fake mountain.

He Xia's expression changed, quickly pasting a smile. "Why has Princess come at such an hour?" He packed the qin away, walked towards Yaotian and took her hand. "Why did you not call for me and stand on the snow in such cold

weather?”

“To sword dance in the snow accompanied by qin is such a beautiful and rare scene. Why would I willingly break it?” Yaotian submissively let He Xia hold her hand.

They then went into the room together. The maids served up hot tea. The three lowered their heads as they tried it, each thinking deeply. They were silent as they watched the wisps of steam.

Yaotian had the most important identity and was naturally sitting in the centermost seat of the room. She tilted her head, assessing Pingting who was sitting by her side, for a long time. She suddenly smiled, “The song Miss Bai played just now was very nice. What is the name of the piece?”

Pingting placed her teacup down. Her manner was reasonable as she replied, “The piece’s name is Nine Days.”

“Nine Days?” Yaotian repeated as if chewing on the name. She nodded, “The piece is good and so is its name.”

“Thank you, Princess.”

“Could you play it again?”

Before Pingting could reply, He Xia happened to put down his cup. His voice was concerned, “Has Princess had dinner yet? Knowing that Princess was going to come, I specifically ordered the chefs to make some Gui Le desserts. Didn’t Princess want to eat it again after trying it last time?”

He clapped twice, summoning a maid up. He told her, “Hurry, serve up the prepared desserts and a jug of the alcohol I brought back.”

Not long later, the desserts and alcohol had been brought over. The desserts were indeed made by top notch chefs of Gui Le and were still steaming hot. Cute, coloured flowers had been carved on the tops of each. Five had been exquisitely arranged per plate. Each plate had a different colour on the top, indicating that the filling insides were different.

He Xia dismissed his maids and personally poured a cup of alcohol for Yaotian. Yaotian glanced at him and then stopped on Pingting, whose expression was

unreadable. She then obediently lifted her head and drank the alcohol He Xia had prepared before eating two desserts. She remained quiet, her face calm.

“Pingting, you can taste one too.” He Xia looked at Pingting.

The table next to Pingting’s hand also had three or four dishes. She lowered her head and inspected them, shaking her head, “Master forgot that I don’t eat crushed apple desserts.”

“Of course I remember.” He Xia replied, “Did you not see the mark for shredded carrot? The apple filling has been replaced with shredded carrot filling mixed with honey.”

Pingting lifted a finger and broke it from the middle. There really was carrot stuffing in it with the smell of honey mixed into it. She carefully put it into her mouth, her eyes brightening. “These taste better than before. What did you put in?”

He Xia gave Yaotian a look before casually replying, “Nothing much, just used fresh honey. Yun Chang capital is placed close to the snowy mountains so this honey is from a type of bee unafraid of the cold.”

This surprisingly tasty desert with the flavour of home seemed to bring Pingting’s appetite with just one bite. She ate all five of the deserts on the table in one helping. Without hesitation, she ate each one which was about the size of a finger, gently filling her empty stomach. She then looked at He Xia’s table of desserts but didn’t say a word.

“Only yours has carrot filling. Ours aren’t. If I knew you’d like them so much, I would’ve ordered the chefs to prepare more.” He Xia’s gaze swept towards Yaotian, carefully asking, “Princess liked the flavour the chefs prepared from last time, so Princess’ are still the same. Would Princess like to try the shredded carrot filling?”

Yaotian’s expression was vague as she smiled. “I love the apple filling.” She then reached for the jug on the table.

He Xia helped her pour, but it was too late. Pingting had already taken the jug and helped pour a cup for Yaotian. A small, soft and friendly smile suddenly appeared on her face. “The snow has stopped and it seems the moon shall arrive

soon. Why not open up the windows of the room, letting the moonlight filter through so that Princess can drink tea while listening to Pingting play the qin to relieve boredom with a little elegance?”

“Hm, that sounds like a good plan.” Yaotian nodded and called for the attendants to open the windows. The days of winter were short, and night fell one hour after they entered the room. It seemed that tomorrow would be a good day, as the moon and stars could be seen clearly.

The halo of moonlight filtered the hall like leaking water.

The maids quietly carried in and prepared a table for the qin. Not long later, the guqin He Xia had specifically bought for Pingting was carried in and placed neatly on the table.

Pingting lit the incense as usual and washed her hands, a solemn beauty already added to her face. She sat before the qin, took deep breath with her eyes closed. She placed her fingers lightly on the strings and hooked onto them.

The strings spat out a low vibrato as if choking back tears.

Yaotian listened to the sounds carefully, sighing. “Such a great qin. No wonder Prince Consort bought it despite the huge cost.”

Seeing He Xia, she half-sighed, half-exclaimed, “Yet only such a great qin could be worthy of being played by Bai Pingting.”

He Xia gave Yaotian a spoilt smile but didn’t say anything, using his gentle gaze to touch her heart.

Pingting tested the sound until she felt calm enough. She raised her head, “What would Princess like to hear?”

“Picking a song is too much of an important task for me and must be placed on someone familiar with qin.” Yaotian’s gaze softly fell on He Xia’s face and she faintly said, “Please choose for me, Prince Consort.”

He Xia thought for a while, asking, “Is Spring Scenes okay?”

Pingting nodded, closing her eyes in concentration. She collected her thoughts before quietly opening her eyes quietly again. An additional spark of undeniable confidence shown.

She placed her hands softly on the strings before plucking familiarly at it.

The tone was different to before. It was a lively, playful sound that jumped into the eardrums.

Suddenly everything was full of life.

The qin sound was everywhere. Although it was winter, the winter chill seemed to be gone. It seemed that time hurried along, making people think that the season after winter, spring, had arrived.

Even the drones did not become irritated. It was like the continuous spring rain, gently and lively pattering on the walls.

Without a trace of impurity, without a trace of heaviness.

Everything was cheerful.

The birds chirped and flew throughout the forest as tender grass shoots appeared in the wet soil from the melting snow and ice. Everything, ready to put on a new coat.

Then silence, the little animals peeped out of their caves. They hurried towards the outside world not long later, greeting the first shy blossom in the forest.

Each act of spring was presented and expanded with the rich sound of qin. It seemed even the air was filled with the sweet scent of mud.

The people in the room listened, mesmerised and enchanted by the sights of three months' worth of spring.

The qin sound began to fall, as if the day was over.

The birds returned back to their nests; the small animals were now exhausted and went to look for an area to rest with clean water. The grass seemed to have grown very tall in just a day as the old trees calmly watched over them, smiling profoundly. A squirrel curled in its leaves, asleep.

After bustling activity came well deserved rest.

After a long pause, Yaotian finally shook herself awake. She sincerely praised, "I'm shocked the world has such fine qin sound. It must sound even better to Prince Consort, who has much better ears than mine and as a companion of Miss

Bai since childhood.”

Pingting received the praise but did not appear to look proud. She respectfully replied, “Pingting is currently living in the Prince Consort Residence. If Princess would like to listen to qin, summon me any time.”

Yaotian took this quite well and she nodded, smiling. “That sounds very good. Could you play more?”

“Of course. What would Princess like to hear?”

Yaotian thought for a little, asking, “Since that was about the scenes of spring, what about the other seasons? Do they have pieces too?”

“Yes. They are Summer Colours, Autumn Circadas and Winter Words.”

“Then...” Yaotian quietly instructed, “play all of them.”

Pingting answered, sat up a little straighter, lifted up her shoulders and placed her hands on the qin.

The melodious sound drifted out from the elaborately decorated windows and door, suspended in the air of the huge Prince Consort Residence.

Spring Scenes, Summer Colour, Autumn Circadas, and Winter Words.

Spring was full of beautiful scenery, summer was full of blooming colours, chirping cicadas filled autumn and the silence of winter.

In the flower-viewing pavilion of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, Pingting had improvised while He Xia considered and decided names for each.

Spring scenes floated past, summer went, autumn noisily finished, ending coolly, yet not cold.

It seemed that the qin sound had stripped down the borders of the residence, bringing in bits of nature. It was only long after the qin finally stopped did one become aware they had been too mesmerised and forgotten where they were.

Playing qin was extremely exhausting. Pingting barely managed to finish the three songs. Fatigue filled her face yet she touched the qin once more to play Winter Words.

He Xia seemed to have been worried for a while. He quickly reached out,

stopping her. He turned to Yaotian, "Princess, it is winter and it will bring greater chills than already. It is not as meaningful as Spring Scenes, Summer Colours and Autumn Circadas. Shall we leave it at that and reflect on the pieces now?"

"Prince Consort is right." Yaotian nodded her head, her curiosity not yet satisfied. She slowly remarked, "The last two pieces are special in their own way, but judging by their character, I prefer the Nine Days I heard in the courtyard."

Pingting smiled before He Xia could answer. "Then let's skip Winter Words for Nine Days, so Princess can hear it."

He Xia guessed that Yaotian could see that Pingting was exhausted and was hoping she would refuse. However, Yaotian nodded while smiling, "Sure."

He Xia was not happy but didn't say anything. The light in his eyes dimmed a little though his expression did not change as he silently sat and listened.

As expected, Pingting sat up and hooked her fingers around the string, plucking it.

The plucked string began to vibrate, producing a beautiful sound, but it didn't seem to be as clear as the original. He Xia was secretly alarmed by this and managed to listen for a while as the high notes were barely straight, highly unstable.

Pingting's breathing was heavy. Her shoulder shook a few times before shockingly fall backwards. He Xia was even more alarmed. He suddenly jumped out of his chair, almost falling onto Pingting. His expression paled, "Pingting! Pingting!"

"What's wrong?" Yaotian was surprised. She got up to study her.

He Xia did not reply. He grabbed Pingting's slender hand and picked her up horizontally from the waist. He carried her around the corridor and placed her on the bed. Only then did he murmur to Yaotian, "Her pulse is a little chaotic. She's probably tired from the bumpy ride."

Yaotian was stunned by this. She then replied, "I shouldn't have ordered her to play qin." An apologetic expression appeared on her face.

Surprisingly, He Xia did not comfort her like usual. He just passed on a few

words, "She should be fine with some medicine and a few days of rest." He then picked up the brush on the desk in the room, personally writing a prescription. He then handed it to a maid who immediately went off to prepare.

He remained busy for a while and was afraid that even the sound of footsteps would disturb Pingting. He personally helped to close the mantle hanging around the bed. He then turned to see Yaotian standing behind him, not saying a word.

He Xia finally returned his attention on his wife. He softened his voice, "Is Princess tired? Princess' room has already been aired with fragrance, so would Princess please go rest there? I will be there shortly."

"No need." Yaotian's face who had always been full of tenderness now looked disinterested. She laughed drily, "I just came to see Prince Consort and had no intentions to spend the night here."

"Princess..."

"We are husband and wife. There's still a long time to go." Yaotian lowered her voice, "You should get a day of rest after just coming back. Sleep well tonight." Her gaze shifted away resolutely and glanced at the delicate figure deep inside the bed.

He Xia's voice was soft. "Then I'll go see you early tomorrow in the Royal Residence."

Although his voice was a sweet and frivolous as usual, his facial expression was also sincere. To Yaotian, his words seemed to be relieved.

"I'll get going."

"I'll accompany you to the Princess Residence."

Yaotian's chest felt bitter but she kept her emotions restrained after remembering her title. She shook her head, "No need."

The words were harsh and she knew that He Xia heard them. He stiffened and his intelligent eyes shifted to her.

Yaotian seemed to feel unnerved by his gaze. She deemed He Xia very important in her life and knew that if she gave him the impression of an annoying, naggy wife, then she would never have another chance at getting his

love in her lifetime. She quickly hid her dissatisfaction and turned away. “Who isn’t watching on the way? We’re married, yet we still accompany you here and there like outsiders...”

He Xia began to gently chuckle. “Princess is thinking too much. We are married, not outsiders at all. If you’re afraid of people laughing, then at least allow me to accompany you to the residence doors.”

Yaotian didn’t argue any more, revealing a girly smile as she let him take her hand.

The two lovingly walked until the main door. He Xia had offered countless sweet and tender words, putting a flower-like smile on Yaotian’s face.

The royal guards outside had already prepared the carriage and the path home had been lit with flickering candles, bright like daytime.

He Xia personally helped Yaotian to board the carriage, squeezing a few more words in before standing at one side, watching the strong royal carriage team head in the direction of the Royal Residence in the silence of the night.

When the carriage was far away, reducing to a small dot in the distance, He Xia finally went in.

It was already deep within the night, and the earth was quiet.

Just like Pingting’s qin, winter was silent.

Not heading back towards his own bedroom, he did not stop until he reached Pingting’s bedroom. He entered the room and saw a frightened figure stand up from the bed. When she saw his face clearly, she hurriedly bowed, “Prince Consort.” Unease was hidden in the depths of her eyes.

He Xia recognised her as Pingting’s maid. He glanced at her, not particularly caring, and then moved towards Pingting’s face, who laid on the bed.

His gaze became gentle.

Zuiju had been accompanying Pingting. She knew that He Xia’s bedroom was on the other side of the residence and had not guessed that he would arrive at this time. Seeing He Xia walk to the bedside, Zuiju unwillingly moved away and stepped back. After all, he was the owner of this place.

He Xia didn't bother with the maid. He sat on the bed, carefully examining Pingting's pale white face. It had become a lot thinner.

He reached out, gently touching Pingting's face.

Zuiju looked at them, her hands and feet clenched into fists as her heart thumped wildly.

A man and woman in the dead of the night, not to mention in the privacy of a bedroom. It was so indecent that the skies would have cowered in shame.

Zuiju studied every movement He Xia made. Every touch and action around Pingting made Zuiju extremely nervous. She dearly wished that his fingers would leave her as soon as possible but was terrified that if they left, they would grope for an even creepier place.

Duke, what should I do?

If you don't come, a storm will.

For the first time in her life, Zuiju felt an extreme hatred and anger towards Chu Beijie.

When Zuiju became so nervous that she couldn't even breathe any more, He Xia finally stopped stroking Pingting's face and stood up from the bed. She then sighed in her relief, knowing that he'd watched enough and hoped with every inch of herself that he would leave soon. She hadn't expected that he would suddenly turn around and undo his belt, appearing to undress. His sharp eyes flickered to the pale-faced Zuiju, frowning, "Why are you just watching? You don't even know how to help undress?"

Pingting was still treated like how she was back in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, a maid over-cherished and did whatever she wanted. As a result, her maids were obedient without any arguments.

"Undress?" Zuiju's heart began to thunder as she glanced at the lonely, defenseless Pingting on the bed. A shiver ran up her spine.

"Prince Consort...would like to undress here?"

"Yes." He Xia replied. Seeing that she wasn't clever enough to come help him undress, he decided to do so without any help, taking off his outer layers. He

didn't criticise however, seeing that she was Pingting's maid.

Zuiju realised that he did intend to sleep and was as anxious as ants in a burning pot. Even if she called for someone, all of the people in the Prince Consort Residence obeyed him. No one would even care. Not to mention, it was He Xia, someone that not even she or Pingting could stop.

Duke! What should I do?

"It is very late, you can go to sleep." He Xia instructed.

"Yes..."

Although Zuiju replied, her footsteps refused to leave. She bit down her lip and nervously studied her surroundings. Her gaze fell on and paused briefly on a stone. She quickly formed a plan and decided that if Pingting was in trouble, she would chuck it towards He Xia's head.

He Xia was a fighter, with quick reflexes, meaning that this attempt would most likely fail and she'd lose her life. She hoped that it could at least ease his eagerness.

As it was now, a weak woman was in trouble with a big man. Despite all her medical knowledge that could save so many lives, it was no use. What other options were there?

Thinking that much, she couldn't help take two small steps towards the small stone.

He Xia had already sat down on the bed, putting down the remaining half of the mantle. Through the veil, Zuiju saw that He Xia had already laid down next to Pingting. She took this opportunity to hide the small rock in her sleeve as she crept close.

Pingting seemed to stir at He Xia's movement. She groggily mumbled, "Hm" and moved around. Zuiju prepared herself, ready to fling the stone through the slit whenever she screamed. In the silence, however, she heard Pingting drowsily asking, "Master?" Her words were separated with a gap before muttering, "Why are you here?"

"It's a little warmer if I hold you."

A slight movement came from within the veil. It seemed He Xia was now hugging Pingting. Zuiju's nerves were strained; she listened tensely, but Pingting didn't make another sound as if asleep.

Zuiju kept the stone hidden in her sleeve, her hand drenched with sweat. She waited for a while until gentle barely audible breathing, barely audible came from within the veil. It really did seem both were asleep.

She was still not assured and gingerly lifted up the mouth of the mantle with a finger, peeking inside.

Pingting and He Xia were lying on the bed, using the same blanket, hugging each other while sleeping. They slept quietly, their eyelashes resting on their face, not suspecting the other. They slept like children.

Zuiju stared at them for a long time before her suspended heart was finally put to rest. She was stupefied. Just what was going on?

She took her hand away, watching the figures of the two people from the outside of the translucent veil. She considered her options and decided that it was best not to lower her guard. She held onto the stone and guarded by the bed.

Suffering for two hours, the weariness became heavier and heavier until her eyelids could lift no more.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 40

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch40

Pingting wanted Zuiju to use the seven needlless on her yesterday. She had felt uncomfortable after temporarily changing her pulse. Even though she had only played a few songs on the qin to test the Princess of Yun Chang, she had used up all of her available energy to do so. She laid on the bed, the familiar fragrance of Gui Le wafting in her nose. She knew that she was having yet another dream of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Everything was so calm and serene.

She comfortably played and joked around with He Xia, utterly carefree.

Time skipped to winter. The two were scared of the cold but wanted to stargaze at night. They had wrapped themselves in layers as they sat on the bed, watching until late into the night. When they got tired, they hugged each other to sleep without a single worry.

The two had been brought up together, did everything together. Despite their different opinions and personalities, they never thought such a thing was dirty and never realised that men and women were different.

The seniors in the Residence knew that Pingting's identity wasn't even enough for the lowest rank for a concubine, so they turned a blind eye to their relationship.

The fragrance of Gui Le was the scent of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Pingting loved this scent, saying it was comforting. Its fragrance was often present in her Master's room too.

She had her own room, but her Master's room was hers too. She had touched all of the interesting things in the room and entered all the time.

"It's a little warmer if I hold you." A seven year old boy said, full of desire to protect like always.

"Open the window."

"But Mother will yell at me again." Even though He Xia said this, he didn't hesitate to jump out of the snug bed. He pushed open the window and agilely wriggled back in, hugging the pale-faced Pingting. "It's so cold!"

"Winter ought to be cold."

"Go on! Who was the one sick in bed two days ago?"

The two young children chattered on, the echoes ringing in the ear.

She groggily woke up and saw He Xia's familiar face jump into the corners of her eyes. Pingting shrank back, widening her eyes.

It wasn't a dream.

"What's wrong?" He Xia opened his eyes, smiling as he asked.

Pingting sat up and turned away, "Why is Master sleeping here?"

"We used to..."

"The past is the past, the present is the present." Pingting stopped, fuming. "We've grown up."

He Xia had rarely seen Pingting angry and couldn't help feeling a little shocked. It was a while before he sneered, "True, we've grown up, and our hearts have changed too." He got off the bed, picking up his own clothes to put on.

Zuiju had curled up by the wall and slept through the night. She heard some muffled sounds and rubbed her eyes, standing up in the corner. The useless stone remained in her hand.

He Xia saw her and he turned back to Pingting. He lowered his voice, "No need to worry, your maid is even more worried than you are. The object in her hand has caught the light of the sun. No matter what I do, how could she possibly even begin to stop me?" He had always been a charismatic man, but after this

night, even though he had no ill intentions, his charisma was completely shattered in their eyes until not a trace was left.

Pingting had known He Xia for all these years. The two had an unbreakable bond, but she had never put the feelings between man and woman into it. Even when she had heard about being taken as his wife, she had never thought too much about it. Hearing He Xia's words just then made her feel both scared and angry. Her face paled.

"Have I ever forced you at any time since we were young?" He Xia's heart had been engulfed by the fire of annoyance as he gritted his teeth. "Chu Beijie is the one that wants your body not your heart. Don't mistake me for him."

Pingting only felt that her heart had been cut with a sharp knife, causing it to no longer support her body. She began to sway.

Zuiju suddenly yelled, "Miss!"

He Xia was also alarmed by this and hurriedly went forwards to support her. He massaged her back, softening his voice, "I said the wrong thing, calm down." Whenever he had annoyed Pingting in the past, he had said the same thing. His words were more instinctive than anything else. It also helped calm himself down.

Zuiju brought up hot water and Pingting drank a sip. Pingting's eyes flickered towards He Xia and saw genuine concern in his eyes. She then remembered that she had to do every trick, tactic and plan to get away from this familiar person. Her heart was filled with sorrow. Not quite sure whether her tone should be happy or angry, she ended up whispering, "Is Master heading out today?" after a while.

"Anything wrong?"

Pingting saw that he was holding onto her wrist and was terrified that the effects from Zuiju's acupuncture had lifted, leading to He Xia's discovery of her plan. Her expression didn't change however, "Nothing much. If Master isn't heading out, then draw Pingting so that even if one day Pingting is gone, Master still has something to remember."

He Xia snorted, "What rubbish. Are you not here for me to see? If you're gone,

I will go through the heavens and earth to retrieve you.”

“What heavens and earth? Do you really take those words seriously?” Pingting faintly retorted back, thinking of the various vows she had made with Chu Beijie.

Through the heavens and earth, to the end of the earth and to its highest and lowest points.

For this lifetime and the following lives, vows lasted through life and death.

“Get on the horse. From then on, you will no longer be called Bai Pingting, you will be Chu.”

Words not to be taken seriously, yet she had really believed in them.

How could she take them seriously? She had her good dream and woken from it.

The sour taste of grief welled up at the tip of her nose. While she was momentarily caught up, tears the size of beans began to fall.

He Xia however, did not realise that her thoughts had drifted faraway. He comforted her, “Every word I say is the truth. Don’t cry, I won’t go anywhere today and draw a very pretty picture of you, so you can display it in your room, okay?”

Pingting’s expression was full of suffering and was even more upset when she heard He Xia’s soft words of comfort. She put out all of her hatred against Chu Beijie.

She then remembered the fetus inside her and didn’t cry out. She whimpered, gradually removing the sound until she stopped.

Although He Xia knew that the Princess was still waiting for him at the Royal Residence, the Princess was much easier to please. Pingting was wiser and more intelligent, making her much more difficult to persuade. He had been the one to set a trap to deeply crack her heart. Seeing the current Pingting so weak, He Xia naturally refused to let go of such an easy way to win her trust. He asked someone to pass on a message to the Royal Residence, quickly conjuring up a random excuse. He then took out a piece of paper and picked up the brush, carefully drawing Pingting.

Yaotian slept even worse than Zuiju that night.

When returning to the Royal Residence, she had looked around the brilliant halls of gold and the glittering bead curtains as well as the maids that attended her. The more she looked, the more uncomfortable she felt. She regretted the anger felt when marching away from the Prince Consort Residence.

He Xia sword dancing in the snow while Bai Pingting playing an extraordinary accompaniment on the qin was a satisfaction that Yaotian could never give to He Xia in her lifetime. She could only give and had given normal day to day actions, carrying out something like a flawless transaction.

Although unwilling to admit, she knew, deep down, what each other really wanted.

Yaotian could barely suppress the sour taste in her heart and mind. She lay out on the bed, tossed and turned sleeplessly until it became the hour for her to get up.

A man's heart was never easy to capture, not to mention, from all of the people possible, she had chosen the famous Marquess of Jing-An.

Thinking of the words He Xia had said the night before sent Yaotian's heart sank, she got dressed and told Luyi to reject the other officials who tried to see her. She concentrated on He Xia's arrival.

Unexpectedly, after a long period of waiting, He Xia did not come. He sent a messenger who had said He Xia was carefully thinking about the frontlines and could not temporarily come to the Royal Residence today. Although the messenger followed He Xia's instructions and put in several good words for him, Yaotian sent him back with a cold expression. She stayed alone in the room, waiting for a long time before ordering Luyi. "Go bring the Senior Official here."

Gui Changqing immediately settled the documents he had been going through and hurried over as soon as he heard the command.

"Have a seat, Senior Official." Yaotian's expression was twisted as she said this. Her face was filled with anxiety at first, but she didn't know where to begin when seeing Gui Changqing came in. She sat up straight and looked at him in the eye, asking, "It seems that Dong Lin's army will be finished assembling soon, meaning

that Prince Consort will be hurrying to the border in a few days. Are all resource preparations complete? Have people been sent to check the most important resource, food?”

“All preparations are complete.” Gui Changqing was used to doing such things and had promptly prepared everything. Even though he was listening to Yaotian’s questions, his eyes missed nothing. He replied carefully and saw that Yaotian was just nodding absently. Hearing enough, she didn’t ask for any more.

No one understood the Princess’ personality more than Gui Changqing, and the people in the Royal Residence had told him about the Princess’ return from the Prince Consort Residence last night. He immediately guessed what she was thinking and changed the topic, “I will make sure, with all my ability, that there are enough resources at the border so that the Prince Consort will not have to worry about them. It’s just...when is the Prince Consort heading to the front lines?”

Yaotian brooded over for a while before sighing. “I thought for a long time about Gui Changqing’s words last night. Yes, I must worry about both the present and the future, but it seems that the present worries are much more scary than future considerations.”

Gui Changqing asked, “Princess has already met Bai Pingting?”

“Correct.”

“What kind of person is she?” Even though Gui Changqing was wise with age, he couldn’t help be a little curious.

The chaotic world with low morals should have been the word of men.

Soldiers and horses, heads of the executed, all that scattered blood and the fame, achievements that came with it were supposed to be in their hands.

Women, if they were born into noble families their real power, came after a union in marriage to someone suited of their rank. If they were peerless beauties, then they would become the legends that drifted around the heroes during troubled times.

Bai Pingting was the only exception.

She was born a maid, had an ordinary face, yet repeatedly changed the power distribution of the four countries. She had created Gui Le's five year truce, won the battle of Kanbu in Bei Mo and even the imminent battle between Dong Lin and Yun Chang was complicatedly related to her.

"What kind of person is she?" It seemed that Yaotian wasn't sure of the answer herself. Her very delicate eyebrow furrowed slightly, trying to recall the Bai Pingting she had seen yesterday and remained deep in thought, before saying, "The feeling you get when with Bai Pingting is very hard to describe. I'll put it this way, when I first saw Bai Pingting, I suddenly felt that all of the varied praises about her were real. Indeed, she seemed like the woman who had ordered troops and challenged Chu Beijie in the battle of Bei Mo. I felt that she had the soldiers' approval, not just the command flag. For someone to stand up to Chu Beijie so equally matched on the battlefield is something truly unbelievable, but when you see Bai Pingting, even that seems completely normal like water filling its container. You think it's something she had done, did."

Gui Changqing didn't let go of any traces of expression on Yaotian's face. He lowered his voice, "Does Princess think that if a woman like Bai Pingting was severely hurt by a man, she would ever forgive him?"

"Hurt?" A little bit of suspicion leaked into Yaotian's eyes, "Why hurt?"

"For something else, he broke their promise and did not return in time, resulting her being forced to Yun Chang."

"Chu Beijie?"

"Correct."

Yaotian asked incredulously, "Why did Senior Official suddenly mention this?"

"I have already sent someone to ask around the Prince Consort Residence about the context of Bai Pingting's arrival. From what I see, Bai Pingting has lost her faith in Chu Beijie, and as long as Bai Pingting doesn't forgive Chu Beijie, then Chu Beijie will forever feel hatred towards the Royal House of Dong Lin."

Yaotian's thoughts were not on Chu Beijie. She faintly asked, "Was that not the intention of the alliance with Bei Mo?"

It seemed that after a problem was about to be solved, another vexing

problem had appeared. Which was more dangerous, having Bai Pingting by Chu Beijie or He Xia's side?

Gui Changqing smiled gently, murmuring, "Princess, Bai Pingting is now useless."

Yaotian studied Gui Changqing's expression and was surprised. Her voice was nervous, "Senior Official means..." She stretched out her hand and lightly made a gesture.

"Absolutely not." Gui Changqing shook his head. "If Bai Pingting dies, then Chu Beijie will rabidly lead his soldiers to attack my Yun Chang. It will become a war without rest. Not to mention...does Princess know where the Prince Consort slept last night? And his whereabouts right now?"

Yaoting was secretly alarmed by what she heard. Her face calmed down, "Did he not sleep at the Prince Consort Residence?"

"From my reports from the Prince Consort Residence, the Prince Consort stayed and slept in Bai Pingting's room, according to the maid that came with Bai Pingting from Dong Lin."

Yaotian's expression became incredibly twisted. She abruptly got up and took several deep breaths towards the window. She took several moments to recover before murmuring, "Continue."

"The Prince Consort is not dealing with military affairs today. He is staying in his residence to draw a portrait of Pingting."

Yaotian's heart seemed to be attached to its final stems. Her fingers tightly gripped the windowsill. With enough force to make her joints completely white, her sharp nails left several deep marks on its carved wood.

She drew a long breath, raised her hand and stared at her now-damaged, long, pink fingernails that had been well maintained for such a long time. She sighed, "If Bai Pingting died, not only Chu Beijie would go crazy, but the Prince Consort would too." Her voice became freezing cold, "Can Senior Official think of a plan for me? Chu Beijie is pressing for war, while Bai Pingting is in the Prince Consort's Residence. What can I do to not sever my ties with the Prince Consort?"

“I have a very simple method that can solve all problems.”

“Oh?” Yaotian turned towards him, looking at the extremely confident Gui Changqing.

Gui Changqing gave her a small smile of wisdom and cleared his throat. “Please allow me to outline the plan to Princess. Chu Beijie was crazed by lust and forcefully stole the Prince Consort’s maid. The Prince Consort had always cherished Bai Pingting and refused to let any harm come to her hence he plotted to bring Bai Pingting to Yun Chang. Our Yun Chang has not done anything wrong, correct?”

Yaotian thought for a moment and understood some of his intention. She nodded, “Bai Pingting was a maid of the Jing-An Ducal Residence and the Marquess of Jing-An saved her from the clutches of the Duke of Zhen-Bei which is perfectly normal. Our Yun Chang has done nothing wrong, so Dong Lin has no reason to send out troops.”

Gui Changqing secretly praised her wit and adoringly looked at her, continuing, “Princess you are wrong. Regardless if there is a reason or not, as long as Bai Pingting is in our hands, Chu Beijie would definitely send out his troops.

Realisation flashed in Yaotian’s eyes. “You mean...we must not have Bai Pingting in our hands?”

“Yes. The Prince Consort went to save Bai Pingting, not to harm Bai Pingting. And what excuse would Chu Beijie have to declare war with if Bai Pingting wasn’t in Yun Chang?”

“We can free Bai Pingting when the Prince Consort leaves?” Yaotian thought for a while and shook her head. “Impossible, we had wasted a significant amount of military power in acquiring Bai Pingting from Dong Lin. How could we just free her like that? Not to mention, if the Prince Consort knew, he would undoubtedly be furious.”

“As long as Bai Pingting does not return to Chu Beijie’s side, then the military power Yun Chang used to threaten Dong Lin’s borders will not be wasted.” Gui Changqing was indeed wise and thought carefully about everything. “Bai Pingting begged Princess to let her go. Doesn’t the Prince Consort cherish her a lot and treats her like his own sister? No one can possibly blame Princess for

pitying her after listening. Remember, Princess, the reason offered why the Prince Consort asked to use the army was to sever the ties between Chu Beijie and the Royal House. Now that the original goal has been reached, what other reason does the Prince Consort have to force Bai Pingting to stay? Did he have other intentions in mind when asking Princess to use the troops? It can't be that my Yun Chang's spent so much national strength to just let the Prince Consort steal a single woman off Chu Beijie?"

Each word was harsher than the last as if reflecting Yaotian's mind. Yaotian took it in with delight and revealed a smile. "Senior Official is right; the Yun Chang army was mobilised for the good of the country and was definitely not used to allow the Prince Consort to steal a woman from Chu Beijie. If the Prince Consort blames Bai Pingting's departure on me, then how could he explain to my Yun Chang's generals? I understand." The plan had hatched in her mind. She no longer worried about failure. Her eyes flashed with the light of decision that only the Royal House had.

"Princess finally understands." Gui Changqing smiled, pleased. "There are still a few details that must be carefully discussed. Even if we let go of Bai Pingting, we still have to convince Chu Beijie about it. If Chu Beijie is not convinced that we secretly killed Bai Pingting despite releasing her, it could lead to disaster."

"When releasing her, we will make her sign a note saying that she left of her own will. It shouldn't be hard." Yaotaian said, "It's just...when we release her, we can never control her whereabouts again. If she returns to Chu Beijie's side, or even the Prince Consort's side, then wouldn't our efforts have gone in vain?"

"Rest assured, Princess. Bai Pingting bitterly hates Chu Beijie and is unlikely to return to Dong Lin." Gui Changqing had obviously put a lot of thought into this problem. "Bai Pingting treasures both Chu Beijie and the Prince Consort a lot. If we take her pride and arrogance, then there is one method that can cause her to never see either man again."

"What method?"

Gui Changqing seemed to be unable to speak and slightly hesitated. He finally lowered his voice, "It is a chaotic world and there are all sorts of people who do not obey the law. If Bai Pingting goes out on the road alone and happened to

meet some bandits, then..." He left off the final words, saying, "Then how could she face other people? If some unnamed bandit on the road violated her, then even if she becomes the most shameful beggar, she will not be related to our Yun Chang at all. Even if Chu Beijie finds her, there is no chance of her being with him again. Chu Beijie would still hate the Royal House of Dong Lin for this. After all, they were the ones who agreed to the exchange and sacrificed Chu Beijie's beloved woman."

Yaotian was still a woman and thought for a while, her expression changing. When Gui Changqing finished, she shook her head. "That's no good. Does Senior Official have any other plans?"

"Not dead, but a life even worse than death. There is no better method."

"But..."

"Princess! Princess must not hesitate. The Dong Lin army is at the border, and the Prince Consort's intentions are emerging. If we don't rid ourselves of Bai Pingting, then the country is at stake." Gui Changqing's voice was earnest. He murmured, "Princess only needs to see Bai Pingting when the Prince Consort leaves, save a few warm words to her and make her leave a note. Then you can let her go and I shall arrange the rest, without any evidence."

A complicated light flashed in Yaotian's eyes. She thought a little but still shook her head.

"Princess! Princess! Listen to my heartfelt words..."

Gui Changqing wanted to say more, but was stopped by Yaotian who turned towards him. "Leave for now, Senior Official. Allow me some time to think."

Gui Changqing raised his head and saw her stubborn back. He knew no words could change her mind so he obeyed orders and bowed. "I depart." He sighed heavily and went through the bead curtain.

Yaotian's back didn't move for a long time as if solidified to a rock statue.

Luyi walked in, reporting from the other side of the curtain. "Princess, outside..."

"Go away!" Yaotian thundered loudly. She abruptly turned around and

grabbed something on the table to throw outside. The Fangniang rouge, used the night before, flew outside of its gilded box.

The sudden sound stopped before Luyi, scattering until the earth bled red.

Bai Pingting, Bai Pingting of Jing-An Ducal Residence.

You directed Gui Le's life and death, directed Bei Mo's life and death, directed Dong Lin's life and death. Now you play qin, smile softly to direct my Yun Chang's life and death?

How could I let the strings under your fingers direct my dignified country of Yun Chang as well the dignified Princess of Yun Chang?

How could I let you ruin my country, ruin my home?

Yaotian bit her lip and tore the window curtain, inch by inch.

Dong Lin and Yun Chang were to encounter the other at the borders. The battle drums sounded in preparation.

The sound was slow and lifeless as if coming from the distance. It seemed to be like the ancient melodies of the heaven and earth, hiding its true potential as they continued.

By the time flags covered the sun and moon, the Dong Lin army had finished assembling. Looking afar, it seemed like the camp full of calm eyes and the cold gleam of weapons covered for endless square miles.

The wind rustled on the plains.

The lightness of the dew on the grass in the morning seemed to have evaporated by the murderous intention of the soldiers until not a trace was left.

"Duke, the Dragon Wolf Barracks have also arrived."

When Chu Beijie heard the news, he raised his hand to open the door's curtain and walked out of the advisory tent. He stood up straight. As steady as a mountain, his piercing gaze turned downwards to look at the neatly lined up army before him.

The army had already assembled.

The flags covered every inch of the sky and faces of young, yet fearless faces

stared up at him. All of them made up the important force that protected Dong Lin.

Chu Beijie quietly watched them all.

“How is the situation back at the capital?” After a long time, he whispered to Chen Mu, behind him.

Chen Mu sighed. “The King has already consecutively sent sixteen handwritten letters ordering Duke to immediately withdraw the army, with an unprecedented harsh tone. Does Duke really not want to see the King’s letters?”

A shiny trace of resolution flashed in Chu Beijie’s eyes. His voice was cold. “If I read one of his letters, then I have already lost Pingting.”

Ze Yin’s messenger had finally brought the truth.

A letter saying whether Bai Pingting had really murdered Dong Lin’s two princes or not.

But what use did it do?

Even if Bai Pingting had really murdered the two princes, he had already decided to love her anyway. Even if Pingting hadn’t murdered the two princes, the King and Queen had still used her as a bargaining chip.

In such a chaotic world, what use was the truth?

Chu Beijie hated it and detested himself.

A personal letter from his Brother had startled him out of his cozy secluded residence, jolting him away from his everything.

But he didn’t have any excuse. He was the one who chose to abandon it.

Since knowing about Concubine Li’s birthday, he’d realised that the blood of the Royal House was at stake. He decided what to do, he chose his path for himself.

It had been his biggest mistake in his life, and he regretted the decision he made then.

He knew that his Brother and He Xia had used this method to make Pingting see her place in Chu Beijie’s heart, so that when she realised that no matter how

much Chu Beijie loved Bai Pingting, he made his final decision, the one to abandon her.

For Pingting who considered love to be as important as water, it was a fatal blow.

The heartbreaking pain never stopped for Chu Beijie the moment he realised this.

“As long as Duke is worried about Pingting, what else matters? Even if these two hands go to waste and can never play qin again?” She had looked profoundly at him and gave her everything to him without a qualm.

She had sung songs in his arm, politely listening to his worries.

That proud, arrogant heart.

That exquisitely made heart had spent all that effort in letting him know how much she cared for him as well as how troubling it was.

Every word she once said ached in Chu Beijie’s heart, and every expression she had made Chu Beijie’s heart shatter.

He had never known that memories could drive someone mad.

The army had already been assembled.

Pingting, I will soon march towards Yun Chang.

I will sacrifice everything to bring back my Duchess.

I must personally tell you that even everything in the world cannot compare to your smiling face. In Chu Beijie’s heart, there is nothing more important than you.

We’ll talk about a sky-shattering, earth-rumbling love this time, a real one. No matter the thousands of twists and turns, that will never change.

The sound of hooves caused Chu Beijie to turn back. A dirty, mud-caked Luoshang jumped off the horse and dashed towards to kneel before Chu Beijie. “Duke!”

“How is the secluded residence? How is Moran?”

After the battle at the secluded residence, Moran and many other guards,

including enemy soldiers, had suffered great injuries. Luoshang's injuries were the lightest of them all. He was ordered to stay to clear out the residence while tending to his injured brothers.

Luoshang reported, "Half of the secluded residence was burned to ashes and cleared up. The dead have also been buried. A doctor has been healing my brothers who survived, and Moran's health has improved. However, Juntian, he...he didn't survive."

Chu Beijie's face looked dejected.

He had taught each of these guards and promoted them personally. Each of them were young, strong, and passionate. How could one not feel heartbroken at such loss?

"Duke..." Luoshang still had something important he had not yet said. He carefully hesitated before beginning his report, when seeing Chu Beijie's expression. "When we cleared out Miss Zuiju's room, we saw that she had left behind several bottles of medicine, as well as a few prescriptions..."

"Bottles of medicine?" Chu Beijie's voice was curt, "Did Pingting get sick while I was away?"

"I asked the doctors to check out the bottles of medicine and they said... said..." Luoshang looked uncomfortably up to Chu Beijie and immediately lowered his eyes again, "that it was fetal medicine. The doctor also looked at the prescriptions, saying they were for unborn children as well."

A sudden silence that seemed to shroud their heads floated in the air.

Chu Beijie's deeply shocked expression sharply fell on somewhere behind Luoshang as if trying to drill two holes into the ground.

Pingting was pregnant...

In her delicate belly, she had his own flesh and blood!

The heartbroken Pingting was taken away carrying his child!

Even with all the injuries he had suffered on the battlefields put together, it could never deliver such a painful blow to Chu Beijie at that moment of realisation.

The stone that had trampled on his heart seemed a thousand times heavier, squeezing out the deepest blood.

His heart was numbed in pain; his body was as stiff as a fossil.

“Send troops.” Chu Beijie sorrowfully looked up with a command.

“Duke?”

Chu Beijie’s eyes were like a massive, raging bonfire burning. He emphasised every word, “Pass on the order. All soldiers camp on this road before officially heading towards Yun Chang!”

Pingting. My child. Please wait for a little longer.

I will immediately gallop to your side.

Chu Beijie then swore to the skies.

I will protect you forever, love you forever and never let anyone or anything separate us again forever.

As you wished, no matter what happens, no matter the thousands of twists and turns in our love, our minds will never change.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 41

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch41

The day the Dong Lin army officially embarked on its journey to Yun Chang was also the day He Xia said his goodbyes to the Princess and rushed from the capital to the border.

Most of the Yun Chang army had already been placed on standby near the army. They mustered enough courage against the fearless Dong Lin advisor, Chu Beijie, by preparing every single corner of the border. After all, all knew that only the Duke of Zhen-Bei could defeat the Marquess of Jing-An. Yun Chang placed their faith in the Marquess of Jing-An, knowing with him leading their army, it was an evenly matched showdown against Chu Beijie.

The flags covered the sky as usual while the battle drums shook the skies. It seemed a little less sad than usual. The atmosphere was replaced by fierce determination.

He Xia wore handsome new clothes. He seemed to be in high spirits as hundreds of gazes from officials rested on him. Only the Prince Consort could defeat Chu Beijie at the moment. Yun Chang's fate, victory or defeat, in the battle were in his hands. Under the thousands of gazes, He Xia's expression was both prideful and stern. He turned to look at the Princess who handed him a cup of alcohol to send him off as luck. His eyes stopped on the Princess' charming face and he smiled. Although he didn't say a word, that one smile was enough.

All of the thousands of words Yaotian had melted into a single, deep affectionate gaze. She knew that even if she didn't want him to leave, his departure was imminent. She whispered, saying, "Be utterly careful, Prince Consort."

He Xia watched her calmly at first, At this remark, he suddenly revealed a very pleased, charming smile. He relaxed and murmured in her ear, “There is one question that all of the hundred officials of Yun Chang below have asked. I thought for sure that Princess would ask too, but it seems I guessed wrong.”

“Why should I ask?” Yaotian’s expression was piercing as she muttered, “Prince Consort is a true hero and will not lose to a mere Chu Beijie.”

He Xia quickly laughed and turned to launch onto his horse.

The flag behind him flew in the sky. He Xia’s gaze looked around at the various officials before deeply studying Yaotian. The sole master of the country waved softly alongside the other officials, sending him off. He Xia noticed that it wasn’t his first experience of this kind of heroism and honour.

His opponent was still Chu Beijie.

But today, the sending party was not the King of Gui Le, He Su, and he was not departing from the capital of Gui Le. The country he was protecting was not Gui Le either.

The inseparable figure beside him was not Pingting either.

If he brought back Chu Beijie alive and imprisoned him in the Prince Consort Residence, then what would Bai Pingting do when she saw him?

He Xia’s gaze flickered towards all of the soldiers and generals, ready for departure. He held his sword up to the wind.

“Set off!”

The sound of wheels and hooves began, slowly, as if trying to wake up the sleeping world with its regular rumbling.

Yellow mud flew.

From that point on, all of Yun Chang’s army finally belonged to He Xia’s hands. To counter Dong Lin, Yaotian had to leave no other reserves without hesitation.

The yellow sand and mud at the borders was soon to be wetted with blood, covering the entire plains with its scent. No matter how many people’s lives were sacrificed, the rage between him and Chu Beijie was a feud destined by the skies a long time ago. It had to come to an end.

He had to win.

From the back, the view of He Xia on his horse was proud and full of confidence.

Yaotian went onto the highest platform of the capital walls, sending off the figure of He Xia with her eyes.

As a famous general, he rose to places beyond her reach.

The wind was strong at the high points, causing the pendants on Yaotian's coronet to sway without rest. It seemed to sway her own heart, hit by the whip of the strong wind.

"The Prince Consort will win. He will definitely defeat Chu Beijie." Yaotian's expression was relaxed.

The guards watched over her ten feet away. There had been many officials behind her at one time, but only the highest ranking Gui Changqing had climbed up with her.

Gui Changqing just stood behind Yaotian, the back view of He Xia also reflected in his eyes. It had already become a tiny dot, soon to disappear in the far distance.

Gui Changqing's voice was low. "I always put all my confidence in the Prince Consort, but to fight a war for a woman is not worth it. Do so many sons of Yun Chang really have to be sacrificed to fight Chu Beijie's army? Princess has seen many are young, hot-blooded men of nobles. If this pointless battle is not stopped, then how many of them will be able to return to the capital?" He turned to look at Yaotian. "There is not enough time. Has Princess decided yet?"

The strong wind seemed to get even stronger. It seemed like the faraway flag of Yun Chang's Royal House was protesting with its loud fluttering sound. Yaotian took a deep breath of the wind before her face became serious, harsh with resolution. "I have."

She turned towards the inner wall of the capital, searching and locking her gaze on the towers of the Prince Consort Residence. The Bai Pingting who could change the overall situation was imprisoned there.

The sound of the army setting off was a roar that shook the skies. Even the Prince Consort Residence had been able to catch a faint remnant of its sound.

Zuiju listened, laughing excitedly. “Miss Bai, He Xia has set off!”

Without a clever guy like He Xia around, escaping from the Prince Consort Residence with Pingting’s intelligence didn’t seem too difficult.

“What do we do now? Use acupuncture or medicine?” Zuiju tried to think of radical ways. “He Xia’s presence made us unable to take any action easily, so we don’t know the situation outside at all...why not do this, I’ll check the arrangement of the guards around the Prince Consort Residence as well as the roads outside. Sigh, if only we had a map of Yun Chang’s city. Perhaps there’d be a map in He Xia’s office? Why don’t we...”

“No need.” Pingting softly said these two words.

Zuiju didn’t understand. “No need?”

“No need to waste our own energy.”

“We don’t have much time. If we don’t quickly use this chance to escape, then you...” Zuiju looked left and right warily, lowering her voice, “They’ll see your stomach.”

Pingting looked down at her stomach that had yet to protrude. It brought back the gentle sense of motherhood. She couldn’t help but softly stroke it before saying to Zuiju, “How do you think the Princess of Yun Chang treats He Xia?”

Zuiju knew that Pingting’s question was not an easy one. She thought carefully, before replying, “I peeked out a few times when she came last time. She is very beautiful and suits He Xia. From what I see, she really cares about He Xia.”

“Indeed, she does.” Pingting nodded, “Ever since that time, I have never seen that Princess again as if she has forgotten my existence.”

Zuiju seemed to connect the clues but asked anyway, “Why suddenly mention her if it seems the two are unconnected?”

Pingting slowly shifted her gaze towards the ceiling. Her voice was brief and light, “The arrow has been clipped onto the string, drawn but not fired. It’s not

that one doesn't want to fire it but waiting for an appropriate time. The more she appears to not care about an existence, the more she actually cares."

"She was waiting for He Xia to leave?" Zuiju lowered head and thought, realisation suddenly coming to her. "A wife's jealousy is the most poisonous, not to mention that she is a princess. What if she decides to kill you while He Xia is away?"

Pingting confidently shook her head. "Even amongst jealous wives, there are stupid ones and clever ones. Yaotian is the Princess of Yun Chang who chose He Xia who had nothing apart from a worthless title from a foreign country out of all of her more familiar soldiers. She is undoubtedly not a foolish woman. She knows very well that He Xia painstakingly brought me here and cherishes me. If she were to direct my death, then their relationship as husband and wife is over. Not to mention, if I died, He Xia may temporarily refrain from attacking her, seeing that she is a Princess. But Chu..." She realised what she was going to say and abruptly stopped as the name almost came out of her lips. Pingting's expression changed and she angrily closed her lips.

Zuiju had already understood her meaning anyway and continued the rest. "The Duke wouldn't let her go." She slowly sighed before saying, "The Duke has definitely gone against the King's orders this time and decided to send troops to attack Yun Chang no matter what. That's...still...giving up everything for you."

"Don't say any more." Pingting suddenly stood up. She had intended to walk out but seemed to change her mind for some reason. She stood with her back to Zuiju, whispering, "What has our relationship have to do with soldiers? All of the blood spilled and the loss of human life in this upcoming battle between Dong Lin and Yun Chang are all the results of the sins between him and me."

Zuiju sighed, upset and exasperated. "What on earth do you want to Duke to do then? What can the Duke even do?"

Pingting's back seemed to stiffen at her words, slowly dragging out her words. "I don't want anything and he doesn't need to do anything."

"Miss..."

"Who was the one who swore to the other to always be together? Who said Bai Pingting couldn't leave both the House of Jing-An or Chu Beijie?" Pingting cut

off her words, her tone becoming very harsh. “I had been taught by the Duke and Duchess to be loyal, love your country, uphold your values and protect the moral good. What good has it done? People have to hold onto values and protect the moral good but can’t they live for themselves just once.”

She turned, looking towards the stunned Zuiju. She slowly said, “You all know that I am intelligent and know that intelligent people are always about reason, having reason in everything they do. Even if others are to ask a million whys, answers are always without flaw. Zuiju, I don’t care how wronged your Duke is or has a reason as big as the sky to why he couldn’t come back. I never want to hear his name again and never see his person either. I am not an official of the court and therefore not all of my decisions need to be logical to the end. I am a living person. Why should anyone else apart from me direct what I like and what I hate? I just want to live quietly with my child, is that wrong?”

Her voice was like a qin, clear and lingered in the silent room.

Zuiju couldn’t answer with a single word.

The best of both worlds was never possible. Chu Beijie could only choose one and he had chosen to protect the Royal House, chosen to hurt Pingting.

Then, he might as well continue to protect the Royal House.

He might as well let Pingting go.

Even though it was a strained decision, it was still a decision.

Even though it was strained, it was still a door to hurt. How could one’s heart not hurt with a wound?

Who was the one who swore to the other to always be together?

Bai Pingting was still a mere woman in the very end. Why should someone insist that she had to protect the moral good, uphold values and think for the best for the peasants of the country?

Even if an unreasonable man remained unreasonable for life, that in itself was perfectly reasonable. Yet it seemed the ones who were reasonable throughout their lives were blamed the most for just following their own heart for once.

The world was like that, more unreasonable than its people.

Seeing Pingting's tearstained face, Zuiju suddenly understood.

She still loved Chu Beijie.

Deeply loved him yet deeply despised him.

She despised Chu Beijie for not fulfilling his promise, hated that they shared the same life, forever controlled by their values and the moral good and helplessly punished for trying to escape from it.

But before their values and the moral good, it was sadly very difficult to keep just an inkling of pure love.

What this gentle person wanted, what she so desperately wanted, was something she would never get.

If she couldn't get it, she would abandon it.

Abandon it and never look back.

Escaping from Chu Beijie, escaping from the deep hatred for her country.

"Miss Bai, do whatever you want then." Zuiju's eyelashes were trembling as a teardrop of crystal fell from them. She raised her head to look up at Pingting, softening her voice. "It truly is amazing for one to make their own choice just once in their entire lifetime."

As if agreeing, the final layer of melting ice on the outside of the window broke off.

Pingting's gloomy expression wavered and suddenly knelt down, grabbing onto Zuiju.

Zuiju also tightly hugged her, biting her lip and stifling her sobs.

Do it, do it.

A person's lifetime needed love, hate, decision and reason to fight for it.

To chase that uncatchable wind of the skies.

"Don't be an intelligent person anymore." Zuiju choked as she whispered into her ear.

Be a normal woman, a happy mother who no longer talks about their fears, a

dear woman who upheld values and protected the moral good.

Everyone has the right to happiness.

Don't worry about the fire of Dong Lin, the battles of Yun Chang. Go to somewhere far away and never look back.

Tell your healthy and beautiful child that people can make decisions for themselves.

That people, are capable of crying comfortably but are also capable of laughing loudly.

That people, are capable of being rational but are also capable of acting from feelings.

"Who was the one who swore to the other to always be together? You're right."

"A hurt heart is a hurt heart. Even if you say it's to uphold values and protect the moral good, will the wounds on it disappear?"

"No."

They couldn't.

On the day the Dong Lin army approached and the day He Xia departed from the capital, Bai Pingting and Zuiju held each other, bursting into loud tears.

This was the first time that they had cried unreservedly since coming to Yun Chang. They let out all of the tears from their hearts, freely venting all of them out.

The winter sun pushed away the clouds around it. It too sprinkled light unreservedly on the two. It understood that these two weak women desperately needed its power.

"We must get out of here."

"Yes, we must."

They nodded resolutely at each other, bathed in strong sunlight.

Pingting wiped away her tears and stood up once more. She seemed even more upright than before. Under the haze of the sun, she seemed to have a halo

of many colours, resembling the glow unique to jade.

She had power and power was in her belly. There was a tiny life in there, and Bai Pingting could no longer afford to slack off.

She stood up straight, standing firmly onto the ground.

The servants outside the door called just at the right time.

“Princess Yaotian has arrived!”

Zuiju abruptly stood up and exchanged a look with Pingting.

“So fast.”

Pingting sucked her lip and didn’t say anything. Several moments later she replied, “It was simply a matter of time. Better go welcome her.”

She then went out the door with Zuiju and saw that Yaotian’s maids had already paved the way for her. They quickly moved aside and bowed.

Yaotian had decided and immediately asked for Pingting’s location upon entering the Prince Consort Residence. She hadn’t said a word as she hurried over towards the garden, seeing Pingting in a deep bow in the distance. Her heart froze. Her footsteps slowed, studying the figure in the distance as she approached it. She then came to a calm stop in front of Pingting.

“Princess.” Pingting’s voice was gentle.

From a higher platform, she could only see Bai Pingting’s drooping neck, white and smooth.

Even though this woman was not beautiful, she was touching in another way.

Yaotian quietly watched her for a while, saying, “No need for excessive politeness. The Prince Consort told me to look after you when he left, so I have come to see you.” She said this while stepping into the room, her black eyes swirling around.

The room was well-furnished, and all of the equipped objects were all fine and polished. It did seem to befit for a mistress of a residence.

Yaotian chose a chair by the window, ordering, “You can have a seat.” She took the hot tea from Zuiju, her gaze falling on the guqin in the room as she took

a sip.

Pingting and Zuiju knew that the main event was to come. Their expressions did not change except becoming more polite. Neither made a sound, obedient.

Yaotian saw enough of that qin before turning towards Pingting. A gentle expression came onto her face. "You were sick that day, so I left in a rush, only hearing songs without conversation. How have you been recently? Missing anything?"

"It's all good."

"Then..." Yaotian assessed Pingting's expression, smiling. "Are you homesick?"

This question was a little strange; so was its tone. Zuiju's heart thumped, revealing the colour of surprise.

Pingting also thought it was very strange. She knew that when He Xia left, Yaotian would let her live in the Royal Residence or some other place where He Xia couldn't find her. As long as she was imprisoned anywhere else but the Prince Consort Residence, the guards would not know her strength and would relax their guard, meaning it would be much easier to escape. However, judging from Yaotian's words, this was not the case.

A hundred thousand thoughts flashed through Pingting's mind at that instant, but there was not a trace of them on her face. She softly replied, "Pingting is an orphan. What home?"

Yaotian was still smiling. "Then think of the Prince Consort Residence as your home, isn't that a good idea?"

There seemed to be a hidden meaning in her words, as it certainly sounded suspicious.

Pingting heard this, her mind thinking up all sorts of impossible theories. She shook her head hard in disbelief and boldly laughed to Yaotian, meeting her gaze. The two people probed the other's mind as sparks flew between them until they already knew what the other was thinking.

Yaotian had plans to make her leave.

How could that be?

But this was not a time for thinking. Time did not wait, and there was no second chance like this. Pingting gritted her teeth in secret and stood up from the chair before falling to her knees, without any explanation or warning. “Please decide for Pingting, Princess!”

Yaotian sat on the chair, lightly replying, “Decide what for you? Is the Prince Consort hurting you?”

“Master treats Pingting very well, but even though Master cherishes Pingting, he doesn’t know Pingting’s wish.”

“Your wish?”

“Pingting...has always wished to live freely, free from the troubles of the world.” Pingting looked upwards, her voice was sad. “The Prince Consort Residence has everything, but the tall, ornate tiled walls look like a huge cage to Pingting.”

Yaotian frowned, “You want to leave?”

“Yes, I beg Princess to fulfil my wish.”

“You are someone extremely cherished by the Prince Consort. How will I explain that I have freed you to the Prince Consort when he returns?”

“Princess and the Prince Consort are a family. With the love between husband and wife, what need is there for an explanation?” Pingting cleverly replied, “Master cherishes me, letting me stay at the Prince Consort Residence. Naturally Princess also cherishes me and has therefore released me. Both husband and wife is thinking the same and Princess has only approved of my release because of Master. How could Master possibly blame Princess? Princess, please fulfil Pingting’s wish.” She deeply bowed her head.

There was no trace of sound from above her head, but Pingting could feel Yaotian’s eyes fixed permanently on her back.

The fragrance of Gui Le in the room began to drift, gracefully whirling and dancing in the silent space above the people.

After a long pause, Yaotian’s voice finally appeared above her head. “We’re both women, so I won’t embarrass you even if you tell the truth. You still want to

be with Chu Beijie, right? When you leave this place, you will go back to that man's side, am I right?"

Pingting furiously shook her head, opening her eyes as she grinded her teeth. "Does Princess not know how Pingting ended up in Yun Chang? Is Pingting such a disgraceful woman who would shamelessly make her way back to that man?"

Yaotian was taken aback by her anger and hurriedly softened her voice. "Don't be so agitated. I'm not suspecting you, it's just that there's something else that's difficult to say. Get up first, we'll continue talking afterwards." She personally helped Pingting up, slowly saying, "Chu Beijie has assembled all the troops to attack my Yun Chang's borders because of you. Will Chu Beijie really believe it if you leave? I'm afraid of him mistakenly thinking that we secretly executed you."

"No need to worry Princess." Pingting immediately replied, "Allow Pingting to write a letter and pass it onto Chu Beijie, so that he may know that I have already left."

"That's for the best."

Undisguised joy appeared on her face, and she looked surprised. "So Princess is letting Pingting leave?"

Yaotian sighed. "What else can I do? The Prince Consort will be happy if you live well. Not to mention...how could I not choose the option that stops a great battle? When do you plan to go?"

"As soon as possible!" Zuiju heard the conversation of the two and was as excited as if the spring rain had suddenly come after a hundred years of drought. She couldn't keep her excitement down any more and interrupted their conversation. Seeing the two's gazes shift towards herself, she immediately lowered her head down immediately.

"She is Pingting's maid, namely Zuiju."

Yaotian studied Zuiju with her two eyes. "Say, why as soon as possible?"

Pingting's heart began to skip every few times. Of course the real reason wasn't to be said but if she lied, it was unlikely to convince Yaotian's eyes, a Princess who had dealt with national affairs before many officials. Yaotian's question however, was clearly directed at Zuiju. The lie would be even more obvious if

Pingting hurriedly interrupted.

If Zuiju couldn't reply with a suitable reason, then Yaotian would become suspicious, causing the hope to immediately dissipate.

She couldn't help look worriedly at Zuiju.

Zuiju stiffened at Yaotian's words for a while. She then replied, without batting a lash, "Of course as soon as possible. The Prince Consort Residence is too stuffy, even buying rouge is troublesome. All maids of big residences have to go out some time. After all, there are all sorts of wonderful things on the market. Whether its tanghulu, crystalised sugar, rice nuggets, skill displays and the famous monkey displays, anyone but me can go. I had heard that Yun Chang has a stall that only sells watercolour paintings. The watercolour master would look at the expression on a girl's face and use the brush in his hand to draw all sorts of designs that can't be made with just flower petals and pollen. I bet it's all very interesting. Even after getting to Yun Chang, I haven't even gone out the big door once."

This little speech came like crystal beads tapping as the fell into a jade bowl. It was said clearly and refreshingly, without any stuttering. Yaotian laughed at it, saying, "Silly girl."

Pingting and Zuiju secretly sighed in relief.

Yaotian then asked Pingting, "What do you think?"

Pingting carefully replied, "It's better if Princess decides."

Yaotian studied Pingting for a while, a touch of grace flashing on her dignified face. After several moments of hesitation, she said, "Since it's like that, then as soon as possible is fine. Write the letter and come with me to the carriage. I shall take you to the capital's entrance."

Zuiju hurriedly brought up a brush and ink.

Pingting walked to the table and placed clean paper before her. She dipped the brush in ink, raised her hand in midair when she suddenly stopped, sadness crossing her face. She didn't lower her hand for a long time.

Zuiju knew what she was thinking and waited several breaths long until she

could wait no longer. "Miss?" she asked, quietly.

Pingting slowly replied and bit her lip as she lowered her hands to write, not pausing at any time, until the paper was finished. She gracefully wrote her name in the corner and put down her brush.

Zuiju put away the brush and ink while Pingting carefully blew the letter dry and sealed it in an envelope. She added her signature on the top and handed it to Yaotian with both hands.

The letter had been written, as if putting an end to the Chu Beijie she knew.

The two had wanted to leave the Prince Consort Residence since their arrival and had long put thought into what they would bring. Not long later, Zuiju had already packed up their bags.

Yaotian waited for them to pack up properly and summoned a maid. "Prepare a carriage, I am leaving."

With one hand supporting Pingting, Zuiju held the baggage in her other hand.

On the way out of the backyard, all the guards in the atrium were deeply shocked when they saw Pingting's figure by Yaotian. He Xia was out on an expedition and had taken the many Jing-An Ducal residents with him, so most of the guards left behind at the Prince Consort Residence were Yun Chang's men. They knew that it was Yaotian, their country's Princess and knew not to offend her. Even a few of the bravest had taken a step forward to try to stop her anyway. How could they speak after seeing Yaotian's inviolable-looking eyes?

The Prince Consort Residence guards watched Yaotian bring Pingting out the door, when they suddenly heard a clear male voice urging, "Princess, please slow down!"

Dongzhuo hurriedly came forwards from inside, with a small team of guards. He straightened after bowing respectfully to Yaotian and eyed Pingting. "I wonder where Princess is taking Pingting?"

"City entrance."

"Why to the city entrance?"

Yaotian's expression was neutral. "Pingting wanted to go for a walk and I have

approved.”

“Does the Prince Consort know?”

“I will naturally tell the Prince Consort when he comes back.” Yaotian replied, “Please move.” As a Princess who had dabbled in national affairs, the power in her words were influential. Her cold words brought a chill.

“Princess, please forgive me! Dongzhuo has been ordered by the Prince Consort to guard the Prince Consort Residence. The outside is very dangerous so without the Prince Consort’s protection, she musn’t leave the residence.”

Yaotian angrily replied, “And you dare defy my orders?”

Dongzhuo bowed three more times, but his voice hardened. “If Princess wants to take away Pingting, then please kill Dongzhuo first.”

“How dare you!” Yaotian flew into a rage, challenging him to go further.

How daring could anyone act so rudely to Princess Yaotian in Yun Chang? Yaotian waved her sleeves and the guards that had come with her from the Royal Residence unsheathed their swords, gleaming with its cold light as it pointed towards Dong Zhuo and his group.

The atmosphere was very tense.

Dongzhuo still refused to move. He had received orders from He Xia and had been ordered to guard the Prince Consort Residence. No matter what, he couldn’t let Yaotian take away Pingting. He raised his head to look at the sharp tips of the swords, articulating clearly his words. “If Princess wants to take away Pingting, then please kill Dongzhuo first.”

Yaotian was furious, secretly shattering her teeth. However, Dongzhuo was one of the people He Xia had brought from the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Taking away Pingting had already taken a lot of effort, but if she were to kill one of his beloved men, how could she ever explain to him? She harrumped and coldly replied, “Even the Prince Consort doesn’t speak so rudely to me. How mighty brave of you.”

Dongzhuo wasn’t afraid of Yaotian and was about to retort back until he heard Pingting’s familiar soft voice that drilled into his ears. “Dongzhuo, do you really

want to stop me?" Her voice was gentle and made his heart ache.

Because of various unspeakable reasons, ever since Pingting had fell into He Xia's hands, Dongzhuo had done everything to hide from her.

"Pingting, I..."

"Are you really that heartless?" Pingting's voice was soft. "Dongzhuo, look at me."

Dongzhuo lowered his head even further.

He was one of men from the Ducal Residence and had personally witnessed He Xia pushing Pingting to her limits out of jealousy, wrenching her away from Chu Beijie's side.

He Xia had imprisoned her at the Prince Consort Residence but elevated her status to a mistress. Dongzhuo had been both afraid and doubtful. If He Xia's jealousy towards Chu Beijie would not waver, then he may force Pingting to become his concubine. Knowing Pingting's pride and arrogance, perhaps she'd be completely crushed by this as a result.

How could former playmates go to such extent to harm each other?

Ever since the murder of the Duke and Duchess, he understood less and less of the Master he had grown up with.

"Dongzhuo, raise your head and look at me."

Dongzhuo turned away as if Pingting's gaze was fiery hot, burning until cracks appeared on his skin.

So painful that it didn't hurt any more.

Seeing no response from him, Pingting walked towards him, brushing away the sword points away. She held his hand.

The sudden touch, no matter how gentle, still sent a jolt through Dongzhuo's body.

"Do you still remember that night when you sent me off?" Pingting asked with a whisper.

Dongzhuo clenched his teeth, muffling out his words several moments later. "I

do.”

It had been after the King of Gui Le, He Su, had decided to execute the House of Jing-An, but Pingting had finally deceived Chu Beijie into a five-year truce of peace to Gui Le. It had been a great accomplishment but because of He Xia’s suspicion, she was forced to leave.

In the endless darkness of the night, he had watched the lone figure on the horse off.

Pingting faintly sighed. “Why stay when I shouldn’t?” She tightened her grip on Dongzhuo’s hands, softening her voice. “My dear brother, send off your sister once more, okay?”

It seemed as if Dongzhuo had frozen stiff. He couldn’t bear the expression on Pingting’s face as she pleaded. Then, the silence yanked out the many thoughts and memories that had been pressed deeply into his heart.

These two soft hands that held his could play very nice-sounding qin yet had been swept into the war, bloodstained and no longer innocent.

Dongzhuo raised his head and looked into Pingting’s eyes. He suddenly removed his hands from hers, turning away fiercely. He lowered his voice, “I didn’t see anything.”

Pingting was very saddened by this and watched him quietly. Zuiju had already begun to pull her by the wrist towards the door, overjoyed. “Hurry!” and then pushed her through it.

Yaotian really didn’t want to form a bad impression on He Xia’s people, so she was secretly overjoyed by this as she led the rest of her escorts to the outside of the Prince Consort Residence.

Once all were in their respective places, horse or carriage, they began to leave the Prince Consort Residence with a thunder.

“Here is some silver, please use it on the way.” Yaotian’s carriage had already been prepared with a bag of money and she ordered Zuiju to put it away carefully. She softly sighed and turned to Pingting, “A woman’s life is just no good. If you really can explore the earth without a single care for the rest of the world, as free as a bird, then you are indeed stronger than me.”

Pingting managed a smile. “With the Prince Consort with Princess, how could you not be stronger than Pingting?”

Yaotian did not know when she had been touched by her. She just sighed and didn’t say another word.

The three remained silent in the huge, elaborately decorated carriage. They quietly listened to the sound of the rolling wheels.

Not long later, the carriage stopped and a person reported from outside the curtain. “Princess, we have arrived at the capital entrance.”

Pingting and Zuiju came back to their senses, turning to Yaotian, slightly afraid that she would change her mind.

Yaotian softly replied, “You can leave.”

Pingting and Zuiju both bowed towards her. “Thank you, Princess.”

“I should be the one thanking you for your letter. With it, you have saved millions of sons of my Yun Chang.” Yaotian seemed deeply tired as she waved her hand, saying, “Go. I wish you all the best with no more suffering.”

Zuiju held the baggage with one hand, the other helping Pingting as she got off the carriage. The two stood at the city gates, watching the carriage disappear into the distance, slowly, like disappearing into the trance of a strange dream.

Zuiju lifted her head to look at the sun above her, before turning to the wide mud-caked roads outside the city gates. Her voice was full of disbelief as she whispered, “I can’t believe she really let us go and even brought us to the city gates.”

“It’s because there are a lot of people at the city gates, meaning that there will be a lot of people willing to testify that Pingting walked out of the city at her own free will.”

Zuiju temporarily paused before asking, “What is Miss saying?” Her mind was keener than most and had quickly considered the options. Her heart began to beat furiously as she directed her inquiring eyes towards Pingting.

Pingting seemed to have smelled something dangerous too. Her expression was light, “It is still too early, not the right time to leave the capital yet. Let’s go

see that Yun Chang market you mentioned back there.”

For that tiny life in her belly, she would have to be more careful than anyone else.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 42

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch42

When Yaotian returned to the Royal Residence, Gui Changqing was already there waiting for her.

“Princess.” Seeing Yaotian, Gui Changqing got up to bow.

Yaoting softly replied and tiredly sat down on the chair. She raised her hands to rub her temples and waited for several moments before saying, “I tested Bai Pingting. From what I see, she really has no intention of returning to Chu Beijie’s side.”

“Then...what does Princess think?”

Yaotian considered it for a while and hesitantly replied, “A mere woman. If she isn’t a threat to us, then why harm her? The moment I mentioned that I could let her go, she was full of happiness. She clearly doesn’t want to stay beside the Prince Consort either.”

“Princess’ heart softened towards her.” Gui Changqing sighed.

“Senior Official,” Yaotian changed her tone, lowering it, “Does Senior Official not understand Yaotian’s troubles?”

Gui Changqing was silent.

This official of Yun Chang had always been uncompromisingly firm in his methods when dealing with matters that could affect Yun Chang’s future.

He got up, shifting his gaze away from Yaotian towards a distant tower he could not see clearly. He gradually said, “Aren’t Princess’ troubles supposed to be the troubles of Yun Chang? Princess has already acquired great power and it should be used to protect and bring mercy to many, not just a single Bai

Pingting. It's true, releasing Bai Pingting is not something difficult. However, I worry that if Princess is unable to deal with a small affair like Bai Pingting, not willing to go further simply because it's troublesome, will Princess be able to properly deal with bigger affairs without bringing destruction to the entire Yun Chang?

Yaotian was at a loss for words and remained silent.

Gui Changqing then continued, "War is very cruel, a predatory jungle, and is never the true path of life. Princess has a very important position, and many people will take advantage if Princess' is not heartless enough. Just because Princess doesn't want others to taste the bitter fruit of defeat, does this mean you will have it instead?

Yaotian took every word to heart and remained silent for a long time. "Yaotian understands Senior Official's intention."

"Please consider it, Princess."

Yaotian stayed silent for a while before sighing. "Sigh, go ahead, Senior Official."

"Yes!"

"Senior Official..."

"Please speak, Princess..."

"You must keep it a secret and mustn't let the Prince Consort know."

"I will take care," Gui Changqing departed, still in a bow.

The bead curtains shook at the movement, causing the jewels on it collide into each other, scattering the light coldly in all directions.

He Xia was on his way, his body full of dust as he speed towards the border.

If he knew that his most beloved maid had met with misfortune, how would he react?

Yaotian was fully worried as she thought carefully over and over again.

She dearly loved that man and clearly understood that if He Xia knew what she had done, she would never be forgiven.

Fate just played too many tricks on people.

Pingting, that woman called Pingting, was so clever yet simple.

Exploring the earth, without a single care for the rest of the world, as free as a bird.

If one could really explore the world the earth, without a single care for the rest of the world, truly as free as a bird, then how truly amazing it would be...

Because, even though Yun Chang was the most peaceful compared to the other three countries, she had been following the national policy that stayed with her through throughout life.

Although the clouds of battle now covered the head of this peaceful country, the markets in the capital had not yet been affected. Several carriages, horses and people strolled around the stalls that sold peanuts, soybean milk, rice dumplings as well as various displays, some with monkeys as they basked for money. Several maids curiously walked along the street, picking out rouge or watercolour paints and many seemed to have been ordered to buy a few for their residence's ladies and madams.

Pingting and Zuiju picked the places with the most number of people. They took several alleyways as shortcuts, twisting and turning until not long later, they had reached another bustling street.

Zuiju followed closely behind her, holding the baggage. Her feet no longer enjoyed the touch of ground, "Miss, we have already been walking for a long time."

"I'm trying to throw off the tail behind us."

Zuiju was surprised, "There's someone following us?"

"I'm just guessing. There's too many people to know who exactly is."

"Miss?"

A helpless expression formed on Pingting's face. "I really don't know."

She had always been protected at the residences, protected by He Xia or Chu Beijie, and whether she was inside or outside. Even on the battlefield or advisory tent, guards had accompanied her. As a result, her encounters with enemies

were uncommon.

If He Xia or Chu Beijie had been there, they would immediately notice who was the enemy, but Pingting didn't have this ability. Her naturally sharp senses indicated whenever there was danger, but all she could do was to hide as best she could.

The two quickened their pace when Pingting suddenly stopped and said, "I'm thirsty. Let's buy a bowl of soybean milk." She pulled Zuiju to a stall and put down two silver coins. "I'd like two bowls of soybean milk please, Mister."

When she took it over, her hand suddenly wobbled, causing half of the milk to spill.

"Kyaa!" Zuiju couldn't dodge in time and was drenched in it. Pingting was not spared either and a few drops spilled onto her sleeve.

"Oops," Pingting hurriedly put down the milk. "It's all my fault for being so clumsy, what to do now?" She worriedly looked around herself. Seeing a nice-looking matron looking their way from her residence, she hurriedly pulled Zuiju towards the entrance of the door, looking very innocent. "Matron, is it possible to borrow clothes from this place?"

Their own clothes were prettily made and they had treated her with respect, suggesting that they were daughters of a good family. With the carefree honesty unique to all Yun Chang people, the matron quickly replied, "Why not? Come in, Miss. How could you walk around the streets like this?"

She opened the door and led them inside.

The matron looked at Zuiju who looked like she had been soaked in soup for hours. She chuckled, "Soybean milk is full of sugar and will be sticky when dry. Miss can take it off and I will wash it."

Pingting also said, "Mother will definitely yell at me for ruining my own clothes when I get back. Please, Matron, give me some water so I may wash may them myself."

"Oh my, don't wash them yourself. You are a guest from the moment you enter. How could we possibly allow our guests to wash their own clothes?"

The matron was very kind-hearted and found two sets of old clothing for them. “Please change into them, Miss. These are my daughter-in-law’s, and her figure is about the same as yours. It’s not made from fine materials like yours, but at least it’s clean.”

This was exactly what Pingting wanted. She immediately thanked her and hurriedly changed into them with Zuiju. She then lowered her voice to Zuiju, “Give me a silver coin from your back.”

Zuiju replied.

After getting into the clothes, the matron took the clothes that the two had changed out of. “I’ll go wash them first, and will be back soon. This material must be very expensive, oh my, very expensive.”

The moment the matron’s back had disappeared out the door, Pingting hurriedly tug at Zuiju. “Let’s go.” She put down the silver coin onto the table and was about to go, when she hesitated for a moment. She tore off the blue tablecloth and continued to push Zuiju.

Zuiju hurriedly replied, “Miss, that is the rear side.”

“Of course we can’t go out the main door. If there really is someone following us, then they’re waiting outside now.” Pingting had chosen to approach the matron only after seeing the residence was big, meaning there was more chance of ordinary people and if the backyard was big enough, then there should be a small side exit.

“Look!” There was a little bit of glee deep inside Pingting’s voice. “There’s a door as expected.”

The two crept out of the side door, ending up in a quiet back alley. Pingting messed up Zuiju’s hair, “Tie two pigtails.” She then put down her own hair and managed to tie it up in a very, very ordinary hairstyle. Not long later, it seemed that two had become completely different people. Pingting then unfolded the cloth she had stolen, wrapping up the outside of the bag. “Now they can’t identify us by our bags too.”

The two exchanged a smile at this before carefully walking out of the alley. Their steps were slow as if two close sisters were shopping around town.

“Can we go out of the city now?” Zuiju whispered.

“No.” Pingting’s gaze drifted towards a raised plaque in the distance. She grinned, “Off to the hotel.” When the opponent noticed that she had escaped, they would definitely go to the city gates first. Since that was the case, why not stay for two days and wait until their pursuers were faraway.

Zuiju understood this, secretly praising Pingting’s intelligence. She nodded, “Then let’s go.”

“You go first.” Pingting chuckled while saying. “You go first, I’ll follow. Order a separate room each, so we’re not related at all. Give me a few more coins from your bag.”

Zuiju saw that her spirits had significantly risen, with the energy of a bird freed from its cage. She couldn’t help smile sweetly as she handed the coins to her, replying, “Understood. So we’re not related at all. I will go now, but when will you arrive?”

“Not too close. I will come in the evening.”

Zuiju started to worry. “Miss, why don’t you go first and let me stay on the streets...”

“Don’t argue.” Pingting sucked her lip and smiled. “The capital is now a battlefield. I am the main advisor, so don’t argue with me, you mere little soldier.” She pushed Zuiju by the shoulder, “Go.”

Zuiju followed Pingting’s commands and asked for a room at the hotel. Although the room was small, it was tidy. Zuiju paced around, studying every nook and cranny and did not find any fault that would make her worry. She relaxed and sat in the room by herself, waiting for Pingting.

The silence was lonely and the best torture to human minds. Since leaving Dong Lin, she had never left Pingting’s side. She only had to wait for a while before beginning to worry. Pingting was the primary target, and her body’s condition significantly restricted her actions. What if... the silence made her think about all sorts of nasty thoughts as she sat down. Zuiju regretted it. She shouldn’t have listened to Pingting and entered the hotel first. Her heart and mind seemed to have several ants crawling in them. The more she thought, the

more scared she became. Zuiju stood up, wanting to immediately find Pingting. She burst out of the room but then stepped back.

What if she went and Pingting returned but couldn't find her? After thinking, it seemed this and that couldn't work. She swallowed back her fears and continued to wait.

Time seemed to pass very slowly. Each minute and second was painfully endured, each tearing at Zuiju's being. She finally saw that it was evening, yet Pingting hadn't arrived, causing her to be extremely agitated. She turned in circles around the room.

Damn it, damn it. I shouldn't have listened to Miss Bai.

Night was beginning to fall. The sitting and waiting increased Zuiju's anxiety as the moments continued to pass.

Knock. Knock.

The sound of knocking started to sound. Zuiju jolted back in shock. She clenched her fists but placed a calm expression on her face as she walked towards the door.

"Who are you looking for?"

There was a man carrying luggage at the door. He was tall and thin, most of his face obscured by a large bamboo hat, only revealing a dark-cloured chin.

"Ah..." A soft laugh came from under the huge bamboo hat.

Zuiju's expression changed, hurriedly pulling that person into the room. She carefully closed the door and clenched her teeth. "You scared me to death, Miss! Where did you go? Why did you only come now?" She sighed in relief.

"I've heard about disguising as men before and finally learned it today." Pingting took off the bamboo hat, the black and white of her eyes starkly contrasting to her dark-coloured complexion. They looked like two brightly coloured gems. Something unknown had been placed in her clothes, making her shoulders seem a lot broader but also making her figure seem even thinner. Pingting pulled off her height-increasing shoes and rubbed her small red feet on the bed. "There wasn't enough time, so I only changed my makeup. I am so tired,

need a rest.” She then fell back onto the bed.

“Didn’t you say to order one room each so we wouldn’t be related?” Zuiju reminded her. “Be careful not to let others suspect us.” She then frowned, before asking, “Why is your voice so hoarse? Got a cold? Would you like some medicine?”

“I changed my voice with herbs. Otherwise how could I speak like a man?” Pingting thought of something funny, and began to chuckle amusedly, “When I got to this hotel, I described you to the bellboy, saying that you were my wife who left home after a fight. He then brought me here.”

Zuiju was not satisfied. “Won’t people laugh at me tomorrow when we go out?” But she couldn’t help laughing out as well. She undid the bag Pingting brought back with her. “What’s this? Ah!” She quickly retracted her hand.

“Be careful, it’s very sharp.” Pingting hurriedly got off the bed and came towards her. “Let me see. Are you hurt badly?”

“No, I was luckily quick enough.” Zuiju held out her hand to let her see, a new red mark on her finger. “What did you get this for?”

“For self-protection as we travel. It’ll be much easier to use after assembling them carefully.” Pingting had put in a few knives and daggers as well as several strange objects Zuiju had no idea about. She took them out and placed them on the table. Pingting then said, “There are still a few other parts left. Because the manufacturer was busy, I paid double and will collect them tomorrow morning.” She then took out a brush and ink, writing the names of several herbs. She handed it to Zuiju, “Take these to the pharmacy tomorrow and buy them.”

Zuiju looked at them, curiously asking, “These herbs don’t agree or match with each other and is without central effect, therefore they are never used together. What does Miss need them for? Do you feel uncomfortable?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not for me.”

After being convinced, Zuiju took over the prescription. She carefully warned, “I know that you have good knowledge of medicine, but if it’s for yourself, then my prescriptions are still better.”

“Understood.”

Pingting had brought some hot buns from the streets. The two didn't leave the room. They ate inside before heading to the bed to sleep.

The bed of the hotel was very hard, but shockingly Pingting laid down with an extremely pleasant look. She sighed and said, "How comfortable..."

"Have some blankets so you won't be cold." Zuiju quietly asked, "I don't think I can squeeze in. The bed is too small."

"A squeeze is better; it's warmer." Pingting grabbed Zuiju's hands under the blanket, softening her voice. "It's so nice that my child won't be born in the midst of the various schemes. I want him to be born in the mountains and the forests, a place where clean springs run while birds fly overhead."

"Build a little cabin, cook some food at the back and buy an old qin," Zuiju continued.

Pingting began to laugh. "Sounds right." The two people then silently thought about a life in the mountains and forest, immersed in the beauty of the night. Pingting then asked, "Are you not going to return to your Teacher?"

"How could I not return? After so long, I really do miss Teacher." Zuiju's voice was faraway, "When Teacher sees me, he will definitely yell at me."

"Zuiju, let's make a promise."

"Hm?" Zuiju turned, receiving Pingting's serious eyes. Something suddenly came into mind, bursting into her mouth. "I will never tell anyone about your whereabouts, especially the Duke." She then made the oath the way people of Dong Lin did.

Pingting nodded and sighed in relief.

The two then managed to sleep.

Under the same moon, Chu Beijie was unable to sleep that night.

Other than the cold wind of the plains whirling around Chu Beijie's ear, it was silent. He had his sword unsheathed, dancing to its cold light.

A sword was power.

He had once defeated the Bei Mo army on the battlefield in just three

commands, shattering the entire morale of the Bei Mo army.

When heroes had swords, their spirits lifted.

As long as they had a sword in hand, they should be without fear, surging ahead without looking back.

He knew the sword in his hand was filled with power, enough to shake all of the earth's strong mountains. After all, how many generals were out there who dared to challenge Chu Beijie?

In the depths his eyes, the lights of the army tents were imprinted onto them. The sleeping soldiers inside them never once suspected that their advisor would lose.

Chu Beijie was someone who could not fail. With him leading them, it was one victory followed by another.

Under the moon, Chu Beijie calmly waved around his sword as he danced. His body was like a dragon, flying around in the night sky of the plains.

His sword techniques were sharp, but his heart was soft.

Not only in a mess, it was also in pain.

The wrenched pain in his heart grew deep until living was more painful than death.

But the more painful his heart, the more he had to endure it. The sword seemed even harsher in response.

In the vast depths of the darkness, the dim lights emitted the slightest haze. They wrapped around his distraught figure as if softly smiling at him.

Every second, every minute, he grew increased understanding of the sorrow Pingting felt as she parted. Yet it was something he could never understand the full extent of, the despair and helplessness that came with it. His skills in swords were unparalleled, and his horse was the best in the world, yet the purest love he had for the most important woman of his life was slowly dissipating.

All those moments before the flowers and the moon had been about the other. Now that he thought about it, those memories should have been unforgettable, yet he had shattered them all without reserve. Why did he realise

now that Pingting spent so much effort, despite her uneasiness, to desperately entrust herself to him?

“If you live, I live. If you die, I can only accompany you to death.”

“Please let Pingting follow Duke to the ends of the earth. My honour is decided by Duke and my death decided by Duke.”

The promise stood, not one word a lie.

Every word was heartfelt, and every word were her tears of blood.

After Luoshan's report, he had gone to the secluded residence, uncovering a pot of pickled plum blossoms in the courtyard where Pingting lived in. When he'd opened it, the soft fragrance flooded into his nose. He seemed to be able to see the scene of Pingting picking the flowers. That scene in his mind was beautiful, a picture of paradise.

She was carrying his flesh and blood.

The flesh and blood of Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting tied, moulded together. That tiny life was hidden in her belly.

He wanted to put his palm on that little belly, gently stroking it. He wanted to place his ears by it, listening to the movement of his own flesh and blood.

This desire was tangled up in his heart, causing a hammering pain. Chu Beijie gripped tightly onto his precious sword, thrusting it fiercely into the wind. It flew freely out of his hands.

Little did he know that the person he wanted to save had already set off on a long journey. That journey was both long and dangerous, ending at the edge of the world.

They were ready to leave by the third day. The wife that had left home after a quarrel was finally flattered enough to go home by her tall and skinny husband. The two excused themselves at the reception. To make the wife happy, the husband appeared to have spent all day buying all sorts of good things for her. When they arrived, all they had were two small bags. Those two had become a huge bag each by the time they left.

“Be careful, Guests. Next time you come back to the capital, make sure to

return to our hotel!" The bellboy yelled to send them off.

The taciturn husband didn't say anything, but Zuiju beamed at him.

They got out from the city gates peacefully, walking northeast.

"We still need to buy two horses," said Zuiju.

"It's too noticeable to buy horses in the capital." Pingting took out a rough map she bought from a wandering merchant a few days ago. She looked at it closely for a while. "It seems there is a small town fifteen miles away. It won't be too late to buy a horse after a night's rest."

The two delicate girls walked together, carrying their bags on their backs. Their pace wasn't slow. They barely managed fifteen miles when the signs of night began to fall, but the little town marked on the map was nowhere to be seen.

"Why are we still not there?"

Pingting frowned. "This map isn't as refined as the maps the army uses, so the distance and directions should only be approximate. I reckon the little town is still ahead, at most two more miles."

The cold wind from the mountains seemed to leak through the cracks of the rocks, bringing back numerous horrible-sounding echoes. Zuiju looked around at her surroundings. The trees were gray in the dim light, seeming to hide ghosts, monsters or beasts that would jump out at any time. She shuddered and said, "Miss, this is such a gloomy path, yet we still have to walk two more miles?"

"What else can we do apart from walk? Stay in this dark forest of the mountain for a night perhaps?"

The two gritted their teeth and continued on. The slope on the mountain continued upwards, making each passing minute of walking more tiring. They walked on the twisting mountain road for half an hour, puffing when night had fallen. The moon had risen behind them, casting looming shadows of the trees onto the ground. They seemed to emphasise the eeriness of the forest.

"It's almost too dark to see the road," Zuiju said, "It's about time to light the lamp." She opened the bag, taking out the matches and a small oil lamp. She held the lamp with one hand and was about to light it with the other when

Pingting stopped her.

“Be quiet!” Pingting’s voice had a sense of urgency as if anxious after detecting danger.

Zuiju suddenly stopped her movement, following the direction of Pingting’s gaze.

The faint flickering of a fire was filtered through the forest in the southeast direction.

“Other travellers.” When Zuiju saw them, she returned the matches and the lamp back into the bags. “I wonder what they’re doing.”

Pingting’s bright eyes stared at the lights that seemed weak due to being shrouded by the forest. She lowered her voice, “This is a road that must be crossed when going from the capital to the Bei Mo borders.”

The people who meant her harm clearly knew that Yun Chang, Dong Lin and Gui Le were not places where she could stay. The only possible place she could live was in Bei Mo.

If her traces had been lost at the capital, where else was a better place to ambush her than this road in the mountains?

The night was heavy.

“We must leave!” Zuiju urgently whispered back.

“This is an obstacle that must be dealt with sooner or later.” Pingting slowly shook her head, a faint confidence in her lips. “Come with me.”

The two quietly crept deeper into the forest. They crossed the lush forest between them until they were near to the many flickers of light they had seen on the mountainous road.

“That wench! How long do we still have’ta wait?”

Hearing their voices, Pingting and Zuiju instinctly lowered themselves, hiding in the bushes.

There were a few men lying and sitting around a campfire. Two or three jugs of alcohol and a few polished swords laid messily on the ground.

“Bandits?” Zuiju whispered softly in Pingting’s ear.

Pingting gracefully raised an eyebrow, “Not necessarily.”

The crisp sound of a foot snapping a twig suddenly came, causing the two to jump back in fright. They were too afraid to continue talking but continued to peep.

“Yah. Just how long do we ‘ave to guard this damned road?”

The man who had his head tilted back exposed his throat to the jug of wine, appearing to be the boss of these people. He muttered, “Cut the crap. If we’re to wait, then wait!”

“But we’ve ‘been waiting ‘ere every day. When are those two little wenches coming?” Said a scruffy-looking man with the face of a rat as he guarded the campfire.

Two little wenches?

Pingting and Zuiju’s hearts thumped in understanding. They exchanged each other a look.

Another man sneezed and sat up. “I reckon, izza day away from capital to ‘ere. No movement a’tall in the last three days. Betcha they haven’t gone on this road so our waiting is pointless.”

“I told you to cut the crap and patiently wait on!” The boss angrily threw away the empty jug. “Those bastards, useless tailing pieces of crap. How could they lose two little whores in the capital? We’re the doomed ones, eating the north wind ‘ere without a life. The Senior Official said this was a road that must be crossed when going from the capital to the Bei Mo borders and this was a task of utmost importance. If we can’t complete it, we’ll be eating da cold wind forever.”

The man at the campfire lamented at the injustice. “Everyone says that little Bai slut is very cunning. Who knows what road she’d take?”

Zuiju couldn’t move at all and tightly clutched onto Pingting’s hand under the cover of the bushes.

“Not to worry. Sooner or later she will hit one of our people. The roads that

must be crossed when heading to Dong Lin and Gui Le also have people waiting to ambush.”

“Hehe...” The ratty-looking man’s voice was sharp and high-pitched, very nasty sounding. “Though I do wish those two little sluts come ‘ere. ‘eard that Chu Beijie was driven crazy with lust for one of those whores. Even the Prince Consort thinks of her as a treasure. Betcha it’s ‘cos her skill in bed is amazing, good to die for.”

The men all spluttered in evil laughter.

“True, I hope they come onto this road too and see whether she can make us feel so good to die, or we’re the ones to make her feel so good to die.”

“Haha, we’d better prepare a good line up so no feelings are hurt aye.”

Their boss coldly warned them. “You can play with ‘er however you like but don’t kill ‘er. If she’s dead, go see the Senior Official with your heads looped off.”

Pingting had always been spoiled by the Duke and Duchess in her youth. Even when she escaped or imprisoned, she had always been treated with respect. Listening to the group’s foul language made her tremble with anger.

Zuiju could see Pingting was angry and gave her a look, beckoning for them to retreat.

But Pingting didn’t move at all, her gaze fixed on the flames of fire.

That group of people energetically chattered away for a long time. Someone headed towards the forest when the firewood had already finished burning. Pingting and Zuiju didn’t move at all. Their hearts threatened to jump out of their chests when they heard snapping twigs about ten feet away. It was dark in the forests but the bushes were dulled yellow. Thankfully it was densely packed. Pingting and Zuiju’s clothing as well as the cloth on the bag were dark coloured, blending into the darkness of the night. That person walked around once, collecting a pile of branches and threw the pieces of wood one after the other into the fire.

The wood burned in the fire, producing the crisp crackling sounds.

“Time to swap shifts.” The boss got up, looking particularly tall and burly. He

kicked the sleeping man beside him, "You three, go guard the checkpoint ahead. Qi-boy, take the lookout post above. Nanfeng and you, go check the traps."

"I'll go now. Hehe, maybe the sluts are already in the traps, waiting to meet us!"

Another peal of laughter.

Qi-boy had just stood up, turning around to put out the fire. There was still a huge piece of something red behind them, appearing to be unroasted meat. Because of the coldness of the snow, raw meat could be stored for many days outside.

He whipped out a sharp knife and sliced a piece of frozen meat off. "Let's go."

Pingting realised they would pass through the bushes, meaning they were likely to discover their presence. She pulled Zuiju's hand and retreated without a word or sound.

The two found a place where the moonlight did not reach, squeezing behind several large boulders. Zuiju thought if it hadn't been for Pingting's sense of danger and if she lit the lamp, they would have met the enemies, resulting in torture worse than death. Her slightly heavier breathing had not yet relaxed when she whispered, "I never imagined Yaotian would be so heartless. Miss, what shall we do?"

Pingting also lowered her voice. "There is an ambush ahead, not to mention a lookout ahead and traps in the forest." She thought for a long time and opened her own bag. She took out a small box. "Spread this over your hands, feet and face."

Zuiju couldn't see what the little box contained in the moonlight, so she sniffed at it, realising what it was. These were the herbs Pingting had asked her to buy. Pingting had grinded it all into a powder and combined them with a strange oily substance. The bizzare paste that formed as a result was now placed in the little box.

Pingting herself also spread a lot on her own face and limbs. She explained, "This is to avoid hunting dogs."

"How does Miss know they have hunting dogs?"

“That man sliced off a large piece of meat before leaving. It’s definitely for a hunting dog.” Pingting returned the box after they had spread enough of the paste. She took out several more objects from the bag and arranged them on the floor.

The moonlight did not reach them, therefore Zuiju had no idea what she was fiddling with. In just three days in the capital, Pingting had spent eighty or ninety percent of the money Yaotian had given them, producing all sorts of odd things that Zuiju had no inkling of their purpose or origins. “Miss, why don’t we head back to the capital and slowly lengthen the time? We’ll go back the way we came and find somewhere to hide. It won’t be too late to head to Bei Mo after they’ve disbanded.”

“The sooner we get to Bei Mo, the safer we’ll be. If we waste too much time, He Xia may quickly be aware of my escape and will send orders to capture me at all costs.” In the darkness, Pingting’s eyes flashed with pride like the piercing light of obsidian. Her voice turned cold, “Besides, how could I let go of such a rude group?”

Zuiju knew that Pingting was furious and secretly lamented.

This person had strategized on equal terms with Chu Beijie and He Xia. When it was down to the cut and the thrust, a fight that settled everything, she was no match for even a beginner practitioner of the sword arts.

How could she not “let go” of them?

“Now is not the time to hold grudges. They’re all men and armed.”

Pingting’s soft smile came through the darkness. “Don’t be afraid. Those boars are nothing to me, as long as I have these in hand.” She picked a few items off the ground and handed them to Zuiju. She placed her own bag back on her back. In a quiet voice she said, “Come with me.”

The two people slowly crept through the forest. Pingting stopped every few moments before continuing, occasionally listening or carefully sniffing to find the right direction. Not long later, they finally found a small spring. The two continued to walk upstream and soon found its end. The spring’s water trickled between the rocks, causing a gurgling sound of water. Indeed, it was the source.

In the darkness of the night, Pingting had some trouble assessing the shape of the mountains and forests around them. She turned to Zuiju, instructing, "Their campsite fire is clearly visible from here, suggesting that the lookout and checkpoints of the group are not far from there. To prevent us from moving in the forests, they have definitely set a large number of traps in them. It seems the group are divided into two, for maximum supervision. If we try to pass, there is no way they won't be alerted."

"We mustn't alert them. They have too many people. If they surround us, how could we possibly leave?"

Pingting sat down beside the mouth of the spring. She dipped a hand into it, bending the running water. She sat there for a while and her words were thoughtful, "On the contrary, we want to alert them."

"Miss?"

Pingting took the objects from Zuiju's hands. "These trees here are perfect." She began to assemble the objects one by one. Zuiju had some clue of what she was trying to do not long later.

"It becomes a crossbow after assembling?"

"Although it is indeed a crossbow, it isn't a normal one." Pingting took out a leather strap and skilfully manoeuvred it onto the tree. She then brought the leather strap towards the edge of the mouth of the spring, successfully setting up device. "When they step on this, it fires."

After the first had been set, she started on the second. She secured them with a leather strap and hid it in the dense trees or bushes, taking extra care to hide the strap.

She was busy for a long time, fitting seven such crossbows. Each was set deeper in the forest than the last. Zuiju studied them and realised they did not fire at the same time. Pingting used the leather straps to connect them.

"When the first round fires, then the second is freed. When the second round finishes firing, the third is freed and so on..." After Pingting finished, she and Zuiju returned to where the device was first set up. She stood by the mouth of the river, raising a hand to point at the distant crossbows hidden in the darkness.

“The forest is very dark so they will definitely not realise that there are crossbows hidden in the trees. They would only know what really happened when morning arrives.”

Zuiju gathered all of her concentration together, under the cover of darkness. Suddenly, everything clicked. “When they step on the device, the first round will be shot, making them think that we’re on the other side of the stream. After the first round fires, the second round will begin from a further point, making them think that we have retreated deeper into the forest. Gradually, they will be drawn far away from this place.”

Pingting replied, “Although there are a large number of arrows, they are done automatically, so they won’t be very accurate or cause a lot of harm. The real harmful thing is still here.” She slowly pointed to it.

“The mouth of the spring?”

“As it’s the source, then all the water flows throughout the entire spring. When they cross the spring to hurry to the other side, they will cause large splashes.”

“Miss means to...” Zuiju saw that Pingting’s pearly white palm held a few herbs rolled up into tight balls and her voice was confused, “poison them?”

“Correct. We’ll place it in the spring. It’ll slowly dissolve in the water, staying for a day or two.”

Zuiju nodded in praise, suddenly remembering the most important question. “But why would they come here and step on the device?”

Pingting’s face revealed a profoundly confident smile. “Do they not have hunting dogs?”

Zuiju saw her smile and abruptly began to sympathise those hateful men.

This Miss Bai who could shake the four countries had enough of feeling helpless. After hearing some very insulting words tonight, she was filled to the brim with anger. She was planning to vent all of it out on this unlucky group.

Who else dared mess with the Bai Pingting who even Chu Beijie and He Xia were afraid to mess with?

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 43

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch43

When it was about three, the nearly asleep Nanfeng was jolted awake by an unusual alarm.

“Who’s there?” Nanfeng yelled loudly as he suddenly jumped out of the bushes.

Could it be that woman named Bai?

He pushed open the branches to reveal the trap that was set earlier. The trap had showed signs of tamper, as if someone had indeed fallen unsuspectingly into it, yet no one was captured in it. There was something shining in the darkness which Nanfeng picked up and studied. It was a beautifully embroidered shoe.

“Gao-boy! Look!”

Nanfeng yelled and Gao-boy wriggled out of a tree. “Sup? A moun’in puppy?”

“A woman! Look, a shoe!”

On the side of the embroidered shoes, a few, tiny stitched words could be seen in the darkness – produced by the Prince Consort Residence.

“It’s from the Prince Consort Residence.”

“It must be from that Bai woman!” Nanfeng was delighted, “She must’ve just passed and almost got caught in the trap. That whore.”

The men at the checkpoint were also alerted by their loud yells. “Nanfeng, what’s wrong?”

“Boss, that Bai woman is in this forest. Got ‘er shoe.”

All of their impatience, laziness and exhaustion completely evaporated in a

single moment upon discovering of the embroidered shoes. Everyone started to get excited, “Hehe, now they’re in the forest. They can’t escape.”

Two dogs about half the height of men were brought over. They sniffed the embroidered shoes and immediately moved restlessly about, almost snapping the collars on their necks.

The boss freed the dogs. “Go!”

The dogs were released and furiously dashed deeper into the forest.

The night wind was freezing, but everyone’s excitement had flared right up.

“Heh, go, ma bros!”

“No, let da boss go first!”

“Get da two little sluts!”

The sword came out of their scabbards, their cold reflections of light flashing. Huge shadows spilled into the forest, chasing after the agile figures of their hunting dogs.

“Surround ‘em!”

“Don’t let ‘em get away!”

They sweated hard as they chased to the mouth of the spring. The dogs that had been barking all the way suddenly dipped their heads into the water, drinking in large, furious gulps.

“Continue chasing! Why are they drinking water at this kind of time?” The dogs were kicked until they howled in pain, but they refused to leave the mouth of the spring.

They couldn’t help it. Pingting had purposely left a special herbal powder in the shoe. Those who sniffed the substance would have their noses inflamed, making them feel like their insides were burning. This made them wildly search for the closest water source near them.

When the rest of the group had arrived at the river, they too saw the two hunting dogs drinking water furiously. They were completely taken aback, “Where are they? Why aren’t we chasing?” They happened to trod on the rock

that Pingting had set as the device trigger. Their words had not yet fully dawned when the first round began to fly with the wind towards them.

“Ah!” An arrow lodged itself into Qi-boy’s shoulder. He screamed in shock.

“Sneak attack! Bastards, those whores have crossbows!” The crowd of people were furious. They bent down to cover themselves when the arrows paused.

A few raised their heads and heard another gust of wind.

“Careful!”

In the darkness, they did not know how many arrows were flying. They thought swords were enough to capture the two women, Pingting and Zuiju, who didn’t have bows with them and therefore didn’t have the ability of long distance combat. They began to yell angrily.

“The sluts are firing more arrows!”

“When we capture ‘er, we ‘av to make their life worse than death!”

But these arrows did not go very far and began to drop before reaching the spring. The boss was more experienced and muttered, “They’re shooting while retreating. Chase ‘em!”

The thousand men trampled across the stream, armed with their knives and swords. They splashed everywhere as they crossed the stream. They barely arrived on the other side when the third round of arrows began even further away.

“Chase ‘em quick!”

“Sons of a donkey, so fast!”

The crowd scattered in all directions to surround their target, camouflaging themselves and their weapons in the forest. The arrows did not stop. They point in the direction where they ran, but the accuracy had greatly decreased. Apart from the arrow that had pierced into the unprepared Qi-boy, no one else was hurt. The agitated men angrily dashed. The more they dashed, the angrier they became. They thought of ways to punish those insolent women when they were caught.

After the seventh round of arrows, there was no longer any movement.

Nanfeng smirked evilly. “Hehe, they’ve run out of arrows. Bros, take ‘em on!”

All of their hearts settled for a moment before they felt a wave of excitement. They had been stationed here for a long time and were already familiar with the terrain. Where else could those two women go now that the path before them was a dead end? They began to close their circle when an unusual expression leaked onto Nanfeng’s gleeful face. “My foot...” A tingling feeling began to run up his leg. His iron sword crashed into the stone as he held his foot. His expression was twisted. “It tickles, tickles, aaaah!” He inserted his hand into his boots. It was as painful as if a layer of skin had been forcefully peeled off. He screamed.

The boss furiously roared, “Why’re ya pretendin’ to be a monkey, Nanfeng? Ah...” He suddenly felt the same strange sensation on his own foot.

At first it was just a mild itch, but soon it became a pain difficult to suppress.

All of the others fell to the ground one by one, screaming as they clutched onto their feet.

“Ow...ah...those sluts...’urts! Those sluts put poison!”

Conversation was stuttered through the beast-like screams and the hideously twisted expressions.

The boss trembled in pain. He still wanted to itch that place, but it was far too painful. He gritted his teeth, “Who’s protecting the checkpoint?”

“All...all of us bros came to ‘elp o...wh...damn, it hurts...who guarded the checkpoint?” Qi-boy was the most unfortunate of them all. His foot had been poisoned in addition to the light injury on his shoulder. His nails had clawed long lines of blood. Enduring such pain was a tough battle in its own way.

“Damn it, we got played!”

The sky’s colour was to brighten soon; its gray light appeared to be the sky’s brows, lifting into a smirk of ridicule.

No wonder the Senior Official had warned them so many times to not underestimate that woman named Bai.

Damn it!

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 44

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch44

A splendidly decorated carriage, surrounded by guards, was on the road from the Yun Chang capital city to the borders. Messengers frequently entered the group to pass on news to the person inside the carriage.

Two of them were very bad.

The reports from the Senior Official Gui Changqing were an endless flow, one letter after the next. One of them had been Bai Pingting's disappearance from the capital and the second was about a string of people sent in the mountains who for some bizarre reason all caught rather baffling kinds of illnesses. Gui Changqing had employed almost all of his undercover workers to set all sorts of traps on the way from the capital to Bei Mo, but each and every one of them showed no result.

Bai Pingting and her maid passed each obstacle, not leaving any evidence behind. The dragonhead showed its movement but the body and tail had completely disappeared. The most recent letter suggested that they had finally been spotted. Originally they should've been quickly caught, but they had put in some weird medicine that drained all energy from the soldier's limbs. The men could only sit back and watch the two women slip away.

"That Bai Pingting." Yaotian read Gui Changqing's letter and went closer to the fireplace, watching its contents gradually turn to ash. She lowered her voice, "When will they be exposed?"

"Replying to Princess, everyone has been severely warned by the Senior Official. They are to play as bandits and never to leak out any word in front of Pingting." The messenger knelt down before Yaotian. "She shouldn't know

they're our people."

"Difficult to say." Yaotian sighed faintly. "Even if she did, what could she do? She isn't harmed at all, nor does she have evidence. No one will believe her even if she says so. Oh well, go tell the Senior Official not to waste more effort on Bai Pingting. We have failed too many times. The skies do not approve of our actions either. Why force her to her wits' end now that they are already far away?"

The messenger respectfully replied, "I have remembered Princess' words and shall duly pass them onto the Senior Official."

"You can go."

Seeing that the messenger had disappeared beyond the curtain, Yaotian was left behind in the huge carriage. She sighed softly. The ornaments that dazzled brilliantly in the sunlight had been her favourite kind and been placed inside the carriage, evoking a dreamy atmosphere in that space. Yaotian, however, displayed no interest in them.

There were more bad news waiting for her.

After receiving Bai Pingting's letter, she had given it to a messenger to give to Gui Changqing. Yaotian had then ordered everyone to forget the various customs and rituals of a Princess before leaving the capital and urgently headed towards the borders. Rather than thinking of the innocent lives being wasted in the battle, the showdown of the better general between Chu Beijie and the Prince Consort was more important.

While Yaotian was still on the road, the two armies had already confronted each other.

The first confrontation was on the Yang Plains. Chu Beijie had forced back He Xia by twenty miles, resulting in many casualties amongst the Yun Chang army.

The second confrontation started on the Yang Plains. Its center had shifted to the east. As expected of a famous general like He Xia, he knew Chu Beijie was in a hurry to push forwards and cleverly avoided a direct clash, focusing his attacks on the right flank. They lured them to the dark forests. If Chu Beijie hadn't quickly uncovered his plan and sent a fast messenger to retreat, the right flank of the Dong Lin army would have long been annihilated. This forced Chu Beijie to be

more vigilant. The Dong Lin army did not attack without plans from thereon.

Yaotian was hurrying day and night, hoping to stop the battle. She received reports of casualties on her way. Not only that, Yun Chang's dark forests were teeming with human life as it was the place where many peasants lived in. Just one flaming torch was enough to threaten their peaceful existence.

Yun Chang could not afford to unnecessarily sacrifice the lives of peasants. She had to arrive as soon as possible. Chu Beijie was stationed on Bianfeng Foothill while He Xia's troops were on Jiu Cliffs. Once the formal war had begun, the consequences would be disastrous beyond measure.

He Xia briefly explained the situation on the battlefield. His words were formed with vigour and confidence. Most of the hundreds of words in the army report were amorous greetings directed at herself. His generals were a lot more detailed and vividly described the brutal events that occurred—

“Chu Beijie's main troop is elite, well-trained, and nimble like the wind. From the battle of Yang Plains, it is obvious they are the essence of Dong Lin's army.”

“The lights of swords bounced everywhere and screams shook the sky. The corpses attracted numerous vultures. My Yun Chang's cavalry troop charged towards Chu Beijie from the front, and there are almost no survivors left behind.”

“Chu Beijie's power is unmatched. Even courage cannot stop him. Apart from the Prince Consort, no one else can last ten rounds. The Prince Consort is the most valiant warrior of my Yun Chang.”

“The Prince Consort's plan is very clever. First lure them to Youfu Forest, then attack through Dong Lin's right flank.”

“The light of fire has filled the sky, not settling for two whole days and two nights. Thirty miles of the dark forests have been reduced to ashes as of today.”

“If it hadn't been for the Prince Consort, this battle would have no hope.”

“I have been leading soldiers for many years but never have I seen such an army with such a powerful morale and generals in a battle. The real war is dawning, and although the Prince Consort is able, I fear both sides shall suffer immense loss. I urge Princess to hand down an Order, so the Prince Consort can

do everything to stop this battle.”

“Yun Chang’s Prince Consort is indeed a mighty general and is the sky’s blessing to my Yun Chang. If we are able to defeat Chu Beijie’s army, then my Yun Chang will forever be the most superior of the four countries.”

“As long as Dong Lin has Chu Beijie, my Yun Chang will never be able to win. I risk death in writing such a report. Please consider, Princess.”

Each report had been crammed with several hundreds of words. No matter which stance they took, all of their blood raged.

Yaotian carefully read through each of the reports from the frontlines and rubbed her temples. She rubbed them again before opening the side window’s curtain.

The night had fallen on Yun Chang, peaceful like usual. The shadow of the big battle was like a hidden beast, jumping out and biting off a piece of human flesh before scampering away into the darkness.

“Pass on the Order to move even faster. Rong An, how far are we still from the camp?”

Rong An, the captain in charge of her personal guards, led his horse closer to the carriage. “Replying to Princess, the Jiu Cliffs are just beyond the mountains ahead. We will definitely reach there by tomorrow at noon.”

“Do the people at the camp...know I am on the way?”

“Strictly following orders, the messengers were not allowed to leak Princess’ location. The camp does not know Princess is soon to arrive there.” Rong An then lowered his voice, “But it will be terrible if they mistake you for an enemy. Please allow me to hang Princess’ flag of the Royal Cabin tomorrow on the carriage to prevent such mistake.”

“Hm, go ahead then.” Yaotian lowered the curtain and leaned back on the soft pillows.

She read most of the reports on the table. Although all of the generals thought different things, they were all thinking the best for their country.

They all knew He Xia’s swordsmanship was extraordinary, above most people.

They all knew that they were fighting a crazed Chu Beijie. Even if they won, they would not return without casualties.

They wanted to do their best but felt pained by the many corpses of sons of Yun Chang.

Yaotian bit back a cold smile and slowly closed her eyes.

The husband she had chosen did have the power to oppose Chu Beijie, but now was not the time to show off his ability. When two tigers fight, at least one will always be hurt. Why couldn't they solve it peacefully, not fighting to their bitter ends?

If Bai Pingting were gone, then the Chu Beijie who was crazed for her would undoubtedly go too.

If Chu Beijie were gone then the world would fall into the hands of that kind, gentle smiling man.

"Rest assured, Princess. No matter what, I will never blame Princess about anything in my lifetime."

"He Xia will swear right now that there will be a day where I'll make Princess become the noblest woman in the world and then personally crown the Princess as the Queen of the Four Countries."

His eyes had glittered like stars, full of a profoundly magical power that pulled her into its depths.

On their wedding night, he had knelt down before her with one knee, held her hands as he swore to the skies.

He Xia, that Marquess of Jing-An, that famous general.

He was her Prince Consort.

He was the one she had picked, painstakingly from a large crowd, and entrusted her life to him.

Behind every man, they have a destined woman in their life.

Bai Pingting, Chu Beijie is fighting for you and will stop fighting for you. A pity really, such a great man of fame and ambition to be ruined in your hands with

his love for you.

A wasted man, once a heroic general.

He Xia is different. In his heart, you are only a guest of fifteen years in his path of life.

He is my husband, my Yun Chang's Prince Consort.

Forever will be.

After days of travel, they were very tired.

Most of the money had been spent in the capital to buy all sorts of stuff to protect themselves. As the two walked on, they spent more on buying horses, food, hotels until not much was left. It was good that they were now closer to the border. There were many more possible paths to Bei Mo. It seemed that the Senior Official of Yun Chang did not lay many traps to stop them now, so it had been much less dangerous.

Pingting and Zuiju had become a lot thinner over the days as the numerous enemies leapt towards them day after day. It had been a battle of wits for Pingting. She crossed each obstacle without batting an eyelash. Zuiju had never met such vicious intent to kill in her life and was terribly scared. She gradually began to find humour in the pain after a while.

"It's the Songsen Mountains! Hah, just one more day til we get to Bei Mo." The Songsen mountains that marked the edge between Bei Mo and Yun Chang had finally entered their line of sight. Zuiju celebrated in glee as she pointed towards them to let Pingting see.

Pingting hid a smile. She looked at them for a while before nodding. "You're right; it's the Songsen Mountains." Her delicate face was full of weariness after walking all day.

Zuiju carefully studied her colour before saying, "Let's stop hurrying today. There's a family cabin up ahead. Let's go ask for lodging. When we get there, I'll brew some fetal medicine. Don't excuse yourself by saying it's bitter. You have to drink every single drop of it."

"It really is bitter though." Pingting began to frown. "The prescriptions I make

are never as bitter. I have been pretty good these last few days, no nausea or vomiting.”

“No, I am the doctor. You know anaesthetics and poisons, but if it’s medicine to save, I’m better than you. Your conditions aren’t the same as before either. You mustn’t overestimate yourself.” Zuiju glared at her.

Pingting hid a smile to herself and nodded. “Yes, genius Doctor Zuiju.”

The family cabin up ahead belonged to an old couple who were hunters. Pitying the two delicate and charming girls who asked for a night’s stay, they readily agreed and allowed them to stay overnight in a clean little room.

Zuiju opened her bag on the bed. Not much of the herbs she brought on the way remained. It seemed she was missing one type for the prescription. She then packed up the bag and went outside to ask the old woman, “Missus, are there any Mo grass on the mountains nearby?”

“The entire mountain is full of it. This grass is a weed in nature, and it does not die in winter. If you go to the foot of the mountain and push away the snow, you’ll find huge clumps of it.” The Missus was then curious, “Why does Miss want Mo grass? Isn’t that for woman with children?”

“Oh...” Zuiju laughed. “Nothing much. You see, my older sister and I are travelling from far away to see Brother. His wife is pregnant, and I wanted to get some so it can be used to help strengthen his wife’s body when we get there.”

“True. Poor families who can’t buy medicine use this to help strengthen. It’s the most effective. I reckon it’s even better than ginseng.” The Missus laughed, the wrinkles on her face like flowers, as conversation with a girl was very rare in such a remote place.

“Then I’ll go pick some.”

“There’s a lot of loose rocks on the way. Be careful.”

Zuiju walked for a few steps and turned back again, worried. “My sis has been tired after a day’s walk and is currently taking a nap. When she wakes up, please pass a message onto her that I have gone to get some herbs and will be back soon. Matron, please help look after my sister for a while.”

“Understood, don’t worry Miss!”

Zuiju then borrowed a shovel to dig through the snow and finally left.

Pingting slept sweetly for a while and groggily woke up. She opened her mouth to summon Zuiju. However, she did not hear anything and couldn’t help feeling it was strange. She sat up and realised Zuiju’s bag was by her foot, a few herbs scattering out of it.

“Zuiju?” She got off the bed and quietly called a few more times. She was met with silence. Pingting turned to look outside the window. The sky was already a dark gray.

“Zuiju, where are you?” The voice was a little higher.

There was the sound of the curtain being lifted as someone entered. Pingting happily turned around, only to find that it was the Missus of the cabin.

“Miss, your younger sister has gone to get some Mo grass for your sister in law.” The Missus smiled kindly. “The food is already made. Let’s eat together though there isn’t much vegetables.”

“Thank you Missus.” Pingting replied softly, revealing a small smile of gratitude. She followed the Missus to a simple little room. Her mute husband was already seated by the table. Tidily made dishes laid on the table a dish of radish, a dish of steamed fish and half of pot of rice porridge made from various grains. All of them were steaming hot.

The mute Mister gestured as he said, “Ahhhh....Ah!”

Only the Missus understood what he meant and explained to Pingting, “Miss, sit down and eat. Don’t worry, your sis said she was just going to the foot of the mountain and will be back soon.”

“Thank you Sir, thank you Missus.” Pingting looked out at the dark sky outside the window.

Although the dishes were very rough, the old couple was very attentive to her needs. The little room was filled with a warm atmosphere. Pingting placed her chopsticks down and looked outside the window. It was already dark.

She still did not see Zuiju’s figure and began to worry again.

“My, how could your sis still not be back?” The Missus was also looked worriedly outside. “It’s just to the foot of the mountain, not that far. She should be back by now.”

Pingting’s heart was full of unease. She paced around in the little front courtyard a few times. Although Zuiju was clever, the mountains at night were no joke. What if she were to meet with beasts, crazy with hunger pent up over the winter?

She had made Zuiju wait at the hotel in the capital for a while and laughed at her expression, saying she worried too much. She only now realised that worrying about someone else was a much more terrible feeling than worrying about herself. Since leaving with Zuiju, they had been inseparable. She grew more and more restless until she could bear it no longer. “Matron, I think I’ll go find her after all.”

The Mister uttered a few sounds and held her back with his powerful grip.

The Missus also replied, “Wait for a little longer. If your sis doesn’t see you when she comes back, she’ll be even more worried.”

“No, no. I will just take a look around the foot of the mountain and be back immediately.” Pingting borrowed a flaming torch and asked about the direction Zuiju had set off. She then said, “Missus, if my sis comes back, make sure to not let her leave again. If I don’t see her at the foot of the mountain, I will immediately head back.”

The Missus sighed. “As expected of two sisters. She told me again and again to look after you when she left. Now you are telling me to look after her when you leave. Be a good Miss and just look around the foot of the mountain. It’s dark, so don’t climb it.”

“Understood.”

Although it was night, the wind wasn’t very strong. Pingting walked stably, the flame drawing a long tail behind itself as if trying to chase after her figure.

Not long later, she had reached the foot of the mountain.

The moonlight fell on every inch of the outside, but stopped at that point, not invading into the forest after it.

The shadows of the branches seemed to resemble human figures. She raised her torch, but where was Zuiju?

“Zuiju! Zuiju!” She looked around for a while and raised her voice to call.

Invisible waves of echoes bounced again and again out of the forest.

Pingting stood by the forest, studying carefully around it. There were a few marks of someone digging in the snow. She hurriedly crouched down. It seemed that someone had indeed plucked the grass and herbs. The snapped parts remained in the snow. Pingting followed the trail of marks and soon found a few footsteps imprinted lightly into the snow. If she hadn't been so carefully searching or not holding a torch, she might have missed them. She slowly followed the footsteps, one after the other. Only when the thick silhouette of the forest's massive trees covered her head did she look up and come to a stop.

Zuiju had gone into the forest.

She didn't know why, but her heart suddenly jolted and pain flooded into it.

“Zuiju! Zuiju! Where are you?” Pingting began to yell loudly, using her energy to yell.

A desolate sorrow rushed into her heart, making her feel more helpless than ever. She didn't see a person's face but faced with the silence of the huge mountain. There were no enemies, no traps she dealt in the past with no idea.

The silence of the mountains and forest belittled her. Pingting had never felt so lonely.

“Where are you?” She suddenly turned, her pale face illuminated by the flames. With all her wisdom, she could not give a reasonable explanation of her feelings. She did not understand why she had dropped her guard when she had thought her freedom was near.

She stood on the gleaming white snow. The left side was full of the moonlight while her right was full of dark forest. Even the sound of the winter bugs could not be heard, causing her to suddenly realise she was alone.

“Where are you?” She whispered, unable to muster the energy she had before.

The torch continued to burn, producing the slightest sound. Yet it was this

slight sound that became the sole rhythm in the silence of the nothingness.

A pair of profoundly deep, sparkling black eyes surfaced on her mind.

She straightened her shoulders. They had promised to tightly hold on to each other, yet why had she ended up alone in this dark forest?

His invincible sword could shake the earth yet didn't have a heart to comfort her troubled soul.

In the deep night where not a soul could be seen, Pingting's tears couldn't help flowing. Even Pingting couldn't understand why the pain she had hidden so deeply in her heart would surface again, causing her tears to endlessly flow in this dark and endless forest. They fell to the ground, not leaving any trace.

She lowered her head and grinded her teeth furiously. She lowered the torch to look at every single teardrop on the snow. Then, she abruptly lifted her head again and yelled, "Zuiju! Zuiju! Where are you?" Her tearstained face was full of sorrow and despair.

"Miss! I'm over here!" A clear echo suddenly jumped out from the silent forest.

Pingting seemed to stiffen at this. She raised her torch and looked on.

As expected, a figure hurled out of the looming, shadowy forest. She carried a small basket as she quickly ran to her, gasping. "I didn't expect this mountain had other good herbs. I followed the ones I wanted and went in unwittingly. Then it got dark and I almost couldn't find the way back. Luckily Miss came here. Ah..." Seeing Pingting's red eyes under the flickering light, Zuiju suddenly stopped walking and lowered her voice to a whisper. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Already crying like this..." Zuiju held onto Pingting's hands, which was as cold as ice, no hint of warmth. "It's all my fault. Sorry for making Miss worried."

Pingting smiled bitterly.

She had always been praised by others for her heart, but only she understood how ridiculous she was. How could Zuiju possibly know what she was thinking right now?

She blinked, freeing another teardrop to silently slide out.

Zuiju's heart was distressed for her. "Miss, don't cry. Am I not back? I won't do such thing again."

Pingting turned away, her voice very faint. "These herbs are not important. You should cherish yourself; it's such a cold day after all." The two people then slowly headed back.

Zuiju then said, "I'll hold it." She took the torch from Pingting, her other hand carrying the little basket. She remained restless and kept on looking back to check Pingting's red eyes. She studied her, saying, "What is Miss thinking?"

Pingting walked in silence with her head lowered as if she hadn't heard her words. After a while, however, she opened her mouth to reply. "I'm thinking about the letter I wrote to him."

Hearing Pingting taking the initiative to mention "him" gave Zuiju a massive shock. She was too afraid to touch on the subject that had made her cry so often, didn't dare ask anything. She continued to walk in silence.

Not long later, she heard Pingting slowly say, "When I picked up the brush that day, although I wrote many things, my mind was a complete mess. Now that I think about it, perhaps it was a letter from the voice of my heart that even I don't understand myself."

Zuiju couldn't help asking, "What did Miss write?"

Pingting seemed to be considering to say or not. Her lips moved slightly. It then all changed to a sigh. "Even if I tell you, it'll just add to your pile of troubles."

The two fell into another silence. No one made any sound as they continued to walk back. They raised their heads to see the flickering candlelight of the little cabin in the distance. They suddenly heard a piercing, violent roar that rumbled the earth. "Damn old geezers, how dare you talk back!" The crisp sound of a slap was suspended in the night sky.

Pingting and Zuiju's hearts skipped a beat. Their nerves were hardened from the repeated escapes from the clutches of the enemy. They quickly lowered the torch into the snow, extinguishing it, and hid behind a boulder beside the road.

Under the moonlight, they quietly probed inside. They could make out blurry shapes of men menacingly blocking the entrance to the cabin.

“If it ‘adn’t been for us Officials standing up to Chu Beijie, then Dong Lin would have stormed inside and your heads would have become balls for the people of Dong Lin to kick around. Soldiers must be fed so they can fight. How could ya still hope to live if ya don’t pay taxes?”

The Missus’ kind tone had become full of panic and fear at the same time. “Officials, we have already paid our taxes for the year two days ago...”

“That was two days ago; today’s is for today!” A furious voice broke out.

A crackling sound was heard. It seemed that someone had broken the old wooden door with a kick.

“We really have nothing.”

“Nothing? Hmph, what’s this?” The sharp voice interrupted and a man who had long broken into the cabin had plundered a pile of various objects. He sneered, “Even though ya’ll so old, ya still ‘av some pretty good stuff.”

“Ah! Ahhh....ah...” The mute Mister waved and gestured with his hands, stopping the man.

The Missus hurriedly explained, “Sir, Sir, these are not our things. These belong to the two Misses who are staying in the cabin...”

“Piss off!” The man kicked the old Mister onto the ground, his voice vicious. “How do they not belong to you if they are in your cabin? Tell ya what, these things shall suffice as today’s tax. If you still refuse to pay up in two day’s time, then we’ll burn this rot’en home in one go!”

Holding onto Pingting and Zuiju’s bags, they left. The two waited for them to go far before peeping out to see their back view.

“Such cruel and evil henchmen.” Zuiju muttered furiously. “Those are things you see everyday, even our Dong Lin has it. When seeing rich masters or ranking officials, they act like sweet puppies. In reality, they’re as cruel as wolves. If they ever fall into my Teacher’s hands, he will definitely punish.”

Pingting gazed until their backs had disappeared before whispering back. “But what else can we do? I often regret it these days. What was the point of learning qin and dancing? Martial arts and swordsmanship would have been so much

better. Even if the ground was uneven, an unsheathed sword could aid walking. Curse my uselessness, I can't even help myself, how could I possibly begin to think to help others?"

Zuiju disagreed. "Isn't Miss pretty good these days? Why suddenly start regretting again? How many are there with the same ability as you under the skies?"

Even though her words were cheerful, she suddenly thought of the Duke. It wasn't wrong. After all, even clever woman would be afraid when they encountered close combat. If she had been by the Duke's side, he would have naturally protected her, making sure no one harmed a hair of hers.

But without someone to protect her, she could only protect herself.

The two people stood up from the boulder at the same time. Pingting got up a little too abruptly and was dizzy by it. Her foot did not stabilise on the ground, and her shoulder shook a little.

"Be careful Miss!" Zuiju hurriedly said, stretching out a hand to support her.

"I'm fine." Pingting casually replied back, suddenly stable again. She raised her foot, but it had no idea which direction to turn to. This time, she was unfortunately no longer able to support her weight again. Her body felt light and empty before her body headed towards the ground.

In a blink of the eye, Zuiju had already hurried forwards, her hand grabbing onto Pingting's wrist. She hadn't expect that Pingting would fall down this time. She could not support her whole body weight. After all, Zuiju too had only just stood up. This caught her off guard, so her attempt was met with failure. She screamed as Pingting's body dragged hers down and they fell together. Her knees knocked painfully into a rock. Her hands t skidded on the rock, causing them to sting with a burning sensation. Although it was painful, Zuiju still managed to get up, not caring about her own pain. She held Pingting and hurriedly asked, "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Pingting only felt her mind becoming clearer after being helped up by Zuiju. She shook her head, saying, "I'm fine." She thought for a little as if carefully considering whether she was actually hurt or not but didn't feel any pain at all.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.” Pingting rubbed her hands and shook her head.

Zuiju finally sighed in relief. “That scared me to death. Let’s go back now.”

The two people returned to the cabin. The room had been turned upside down. Furniture were either scattered or damaged. The mute Mister sat dazedly in the corner, while the Missus cried unhappily. When she saw Pingting and Zuiju, she raised her head and stopped crying. An indescribably sad expression appeared on her face. “Miss, your bags...”

“We already know. Mister and Missus are not at fault. Besides, there’s nothing particularly important in those bags.” Pingting said a few comforting words that finally stopped the tears of the old couple.

They then helped them to clean up the room and put back the furniture. All were exhausted as they retreated back to their rooms to rest.

Thinking that the dwindling money they had for the journey was already gone, having no change of clothes, meant the prospects were quite bleak. The two couldn’t help but find it funny.

“The money and the clothes aren’t that important at all; it’s the people. It’s not hard to earn money. We can just heal as we proceed.” Zuiju helped Pingting to lie on the bed, “Give me your hand.” She then pressed two fingers and calmly listened to the pulse in silence. She suddenly said, “Hm” before looking puzzledly at Pingting, “Where do you feel uncomfortable?”

“What’s wrong? Is the child sick?” Pingting was also very surprised.

“Where do you feel uncomfortable?”

“No where.”

Zuiju replied, “Let me listen again.” She carefully checked her wrist and her neck but still frowned. “The pulse is a little strange. Could it be you caught a cold tonight? Geez, I should’ve said not to let you look for me. Lie down and don’t move again.” She took out the basket.

Pingting cared immensely for the child’s safety and obediently stayed lying down peacefully. She then began to feel drowsy, the light in her eyes becoming

tiny slits until darkness covered. At the end of the darkness, there seemed to be a dim light gracefully swaying. She was feeling very comfortable until she was gently shaken at the shoulder. Pingting opened her eyes and looked at Zuiju, a bowl of medicine placed at the head of the bed. She was blowing off the steam that wafted while softly saying, “Drink this medicine and sleep after that. Those evil-hearted henchmen, not even sparing medicinal herbs. Fortunately I had picked fresh ones today.”

Zuiju only took back the medicine bowl, satisfied after Pingting had finished the entire bowl with a scowl. She blew the lights out and the two slept together. They had walked a whole day. Zuiju had immediately set off to look for herbs after asking for lodging, as well as a whole bunch of other incidents. Zuiju was very much more tired than Pingting. She immediately fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. With so little energy, she was deeply embedded inside her dream world. In her dream, she saw her Teacher’s stern face, yet his kind eyes hid his laughter. Then she was back in the secluded residence amongst the plum blossoms, seeing a blurry figure before her that appeared to be gazing at the bright moon. The dreams continued after the next, each stranger and stranger. Each seemed to emit a warm taste and was like a path to a different story. She knew each story had a happy ending.

In the softness of the dream, there was suddenly a stab of pain from somewhere she did not know. Zuiju fought in her dream and struggled. It was like her hand hurt or maybe her leg. Gradually, the pain seemed to float like ice from the bottom of the sea to the top, forcing herself out of her dream world.

Zuiju suddenly opened her eyes and felt another wave of pain.

This time, she knew it was raw pain from being clawed by something.

“Zuiju....Zuiju...” Pingting moaned painfully in the darkness.

Zuiju was so shocked she immediately sat up. Under the moonlight, Pingting’s delicate eyebrows had bunched up and her fingernails were deeply sunk into Zuiju’s wrist.

“Miss, what’s wrong?”

“It hurts.” Pingting touched her lower abdomen. Sweat drops the size of soybeans began to ooze out of her forehead, falling onto the pillow.

Zuiju was alarmed by this. “I’m here, don’t worry.” She flipped over to find it, only to remember that her bag had been stolen already. She didn’t even have a coat to put on when she hurriedly found the door to where the elderly couple were sleeping behind. She thumped loudly on the door, yelling, “Missus! Missus! Wake up!”

“What’s wrong, Miss?”

Zuiju grabbed onto the Missus’ wrist, “Silver needles! Do you have silver needles?”

The Missus had only just been woken and was very drowsy. “We’re poor, how are we to find things like silver needles?”

“Then...normal needles? Embroidery needles?” Zuiju was on the brink of tears in worry.

“I have one tarnished needle for sewing clothes. What are you...”

“Don’t ask, lend it to me!”

Zuiju took the needle and hurried back to the room. She lit the candle, its light revealing Pingting soaked in sweat. The pillow had been completely soaked in her sweat, her face yellow. Seeing Zuiju enter, she endured the pain and barely stuttered her words as she asked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing much.” Zuiju hurriedly put the rusty embroidery needle into the candlelight, quickly reply, “Just need to use a needle to pierce Miss a few times. No need to be afraid.” Her tone was relaxed, but she was trembling. The needle was almost glowing red, but Zuiju seemed to no feel the burning heat at all. She pinched the end of the needle as she headed towards the bed, softly coaxing, “Don’t worry, it won’t hurt after a few pierces.” She told Pingting to lie down and carefully undid Pingting’s clothing.

Waves of pain came from Pingting’s lower abdomen as if a herd of crazy wild horses were trampling all over the place inside it. There was no way she could endure even more pain. Seeing Zuiju was holding a needle and that she was intending to pierce there, she couldn’t help feel surprised. She didn’t know where to start explaining and suddenly propped herself up a little, stopping Zuiju. “You won’t harm my child right?”

Zuiju didn't hesitate to reply, "Of course not, believe me."

Only then did Pingting let go. All of the pain had drained all of her energy. She fell down onto the sweat-soaked bed covered with hair from her tossing.

Her belly began to warm a little, followed by another warmth. Zuiju continued to pierce a few spots when suddenly, all of the pain seemed to explode out as if a landmine had been set off.

Pingting began to scream "Ahh" and struggled a bit before curling up like a dead shrimp. She then seemed to come back to life as if the pain had subsided. She frowned feeling the sensation. The pain had suddenly flooded out, then poured out of the gap where the needle had been.

"Feeling better?" Zuiju's voice floated in her ear, sounding very, very distant.

Several moments later, Pingting finally exhaled. "Yeah..."

Zuiju was sweating too. Hearing Pingting's reply, she finally put down the needle in her hand, propping herself to a sit.

"Is the child...okay?"

Zuiju replied, "I've already told you, your body is weak so don't try to be so ambitious. Sigh..."

"Zuiju?"

"You, lie down properly. Your child is fine," Zuiju raised her head and saw the Missus who had been awoken by them looking curiously from outside the door. She hurriedly went forwards to apologise, "My apologies for waking up Mister and Missus."

"Miss..."

"My sis is sick."

"Oh." The Missus looked behind her into the room. She lowered her voice, "Is she feeling better now?"

"Much better. It's fine, Missus can go to sleep."

When she finally convinced the Missus to leave, Zuiju sat down by the bed again. "We can't continue on. You'd better get some rest for a few days."

Pingting didn't make a sound for a long time.

"We can't stay here, we have to go. Now that those people have our bags, who knows who will end up with them?" Pingting finally gathered up her energy and her voice was low. "If they are to chase us, we won't be able to go even if we wanted to."

Zuiju sighed again.

Pingting then asked, "What's wrong with my body? You mustn't hide things from me."

Zuiju was both angry and sad. Her voice choked up unwittingly. "How could Miss still not understand? Your body wasn't strong to begin with. How could it possibly last such a journey with so many worries and trouble? I have to get some good herbs. Even wild ginseng or ganoderma, it'd be good."

Pingting had broken into a cold sweat when she was in pain, but now it was gone. She felt the coldness seeping through her skin. She covered herself with a blanket and smiled kindly. "I'll listen to your words and won't hurriedly leave this place, so I can get some rest for a few days, fine?"

Zuiju wiped away her tears and grinded her teeth. "Now I really detest the Duke. If you have a lover, then you should properly protect her and cherish her. How could he let Miss be reduced to this? No matter how you look at it, he's the one at fault!"

Pingting didn't expect she would bring up Chu Beijie. She stiffened but then remembered her child. Pingting agreed every word she had said. After all, she had spent great effort on Chu Beijie but still fell to such a fate.

She couldn't think like the way she had lived up to any more.

The clash between country and lovers never bore any fruit of worth.

She had always faintly expected it but completely unable to prevent it from happening to herself.

"Never mind." Pingting softly sighed and closed her eyes. "Don't waste any more time and effort on that person or our lives will be meaninglessly wasted." She gently stroked her own belly. Although no one could detect it by sight, one

could feel a small bump if they carefully touched it.

My child, don't get caught up by national affairs and love any more.

Morality is like a ruler at first, but in the end, it becomes a heavy lock and a blood-coloured cloth. It prisons your heart and blindfolds your eyes.

Don't be like your father, and don't be like your mother either.

Dear child, whether you love or hate, don't ever forget your roots.

Don't forget it.

Light purple beacons were ignited one after the other, connecting the sky. The smoke spiralled upwards, telling the rest of the people on earth that the great battle was imminent. The flags rose into the skies, ominous in return.

A distant horn sounded and couldn't hide its own mournful tone.

From far away, it was a densely packed sea of iron helmets. Thousands of weapons were pointed straight towards the sky, gleaming with their cold lights. Every inch of the plains was covered with the cavalry units of the Dong Lin army.

Chu Beijie was sitting on his horse, standing straight towards the wind at the very front of the army. The flag of the Duke of Zhen-Bei was raised above him, flapping vigorously and forcefully in the wind. It was like a frightening totem that could suck away the enemy's energy.

On the slope opposite them, another coloured flag was floating in the distance, also belonging to a truly massive army.

Yun Chang, that country that had always hidden itself, never revealed its face. As a result, it had a lot of time to build up a significant amount of reserve forces and were not to be underestimated.

Chu Beijie began to squint, trying to see that figure, confidently standing at the very front of their army. He was the main advisor of the Yun Chang army.

He remembered the figure that peered down from the top of the Three-Swallow Cliffs, smiling. He was that person back then.

The Marquess of Jing-An back then, now the Prince Consort of Yun Chang.

And the man who stole Pingting out of his hands!

The strong wind blew between them but seemed to be afraid of the imminent war and soon hurried away.

There was a sudden, deathly quiet. An unheard, anxious rhythm grew quicker and quicker, seeming to be play in the silence. The several hundreds of thousands of men stood on the plains, as still and as quiet as graves. Even their horses didn't dare to neigh.

Chu Beijie quietly watched He Xia. They were separated by a massive gap, but they still seemed to be able to see the opponent's gaze. It was as sharp as his and just as penetrating.

He stole Pingting, stole the Pingting pregnant with my flesh and blood.

Chu Beijie's hand silently pressed down on his sword.

The moment he unsheathed it, fights without rest would begin, endless. There was no turning back.

Chen Mu was standing by Chu Beijie's side. His palm was drenched with sweat like the other general. He knew that the moment Chu Beijie's sword came out of his scabbard, all these hundreds of thousands would charge forward, resulting in many overwhelming waves of blood.

For a single person.

For a single woman.

Bai Pingting, a name forever remembered by all of the four countries.

All of the gazes were fixed on Chu Beijie's hands. All of the soldiers' fates rested on that one touch between his hand and his sword.

The air was very tense, and breaths were a tiny thread, stretched until taut. It slowly tightened in the empty gap between the two armies.

The sound of a horse dashing came.

On the southern side of the mountains, there was a few sudden movements. It barged in from the side, not caring at all about the two armies and spilled out onto the empty gap between them. Its movement resembled a light cut with a sword through an oil painting that was about to be lit, bringing beauty to the bleak picture. It brightened the entire picture in one go, although strange and

out of place.

“The flag of the Royal House of Yun Chang?” Che Mu lowered his voice in disbelief.

Chu Beijie’s gaze looked beyond him, long imprinting the large words on the flag into his eyes. A light flashed in his eyes. The first person to arrive took the flag and rode towards Chu Beijie and his horse. He bowed slightly, asking in a clear voice, “Is this general Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen Bei, Chu Beijie?”

“I am Chu Beijie. Who are you?” Chu Beijie’s voice was deep.

“I am the captain of Yun Chang’s Royal Residence guards, Rong An. My Master, Princess Yaotian, has ordered me to pass on a message. I ask for Duke’s private attention for a moment.”

“A battle is about to begin. Where is Princess Yaotian right now?”

“She is here.” Rong An pointed behind him.

The crowd immediately looked afar. There was a ornately decorated carriage on the slope of the hill. It had only arrived in the morning and immediately rushed towards the centre of the two armies.

Chu Beijie’s heart seemed to be pulled by an invisible string, shock flooded onto his eyes.

Yaotian wanted to settle things peacefully.

What else could she use to bargain apart from Pingting? Yaotian must’ve hurried to stop the real battle between the two armies and avoided He Xia, heading straight for himself. It had to be related to Pingting.

His heart that kept on emitting coldness suddenly began to flare up like a fire. He was suddenly too emotional and didn’t know what to do.

The carriage began to drive closer. The other side seemed to have recognised the flag of the own Royal House and too shocked into silence.

Rong An brought his horse to the carriage and gestured a few times by the window. He then rode back to say, “The Princess welcomes Duke onto the carriage for a while.”

The carriage stopped on the gap, the four snowy-white horses had their heads down as they trotted forwards and stopped. Perhaps the driver received an order from the person in the carriage as they got off to leave on their own. They then stopped about a hundred footsteps away, awaiting further orders patiently.

Chen Mu warned him, "Be careful, Duke. He Xia has too many schemes, be careful not to be ambushed."

Chu Beijie laughed coldly. "It's just a mere carriage. Even if it's filled with people, how could it possibly match the precious sword in my hand?" He then rode to the carriage, calmly asking, "Is Yun Chang's Princess Yaotian in there? Chu Beijie is here. Would Princess like to say anything?"

Yaotian lifted the curtains, raising her eyes to look at Chu Beijie who was sitting on the horse, looking majestic and imposing. She praised his style in her heart and softened her voice. "Yaotian has been asked to pass on a letter to Duke."

"Just a letter?" Chu Beijie's pupils shrank. The air around him turned icy. "And the person?"

"The person is no longer in my Yun Chang." Yaotian replied. "Duke will understand after reading this letter."

Chu Beijie's expression became even colder as he gazed through the curtain, fighting a cold staring contest. He then said, "Princess underestimates me. My Dong Lin army has travelled thousands of miles to reach this place just to find that person. If Yun Chang cannot return the person to me, thinking a letter will make me withdraw, how could I possibly follow through such a lame request? Don't blame that I don't believe you, but if that person is harmed in any possible way, I swear to let all of the Yun Chang Royal House's blood to flow."

Yaotian was silent for a long time in the carriage, before she sighed sadly. "Yaotian heard of the Duke of Zhen-Bei's fame as a hero but has a question to ask."

Chu Beijie had wanted to walk away but changed his mind. He could not overestimate anything related to Pingting. He held his reins saying, "Please go ahead, Princess."

Yaotian then said, "I'd like to ask whether this time leading the soldiers into battle is just for a single person named Bai Pingting?"

"Correct."

"Then, did the King of Dong Lin agree to it?"

Chu Beijie sneered, "This is my Dong Lin's affairs, and the army is here. It's nothing to do with Princess."

"The relationship between the Duke and Miss Bai is deeply rooted in the hatred between countries. The question of whether country or feeling is more important and particularly whether giving up their own happiness for their country has always been a cruel dilemma."

"What is Princess trying to say?"

Yaotian sighed. "Theory and morality are often said together, but they are not quite the same. Morality comes from the heart, but theory is based from ethical principles. Theory is often the most correct and complete, so it often overrides morality. As a result, people blindly follow general ethical principles and don't listen to their heart. They obey so-called national interests and sacrifice themselves to the country. It is a real pity if they didn't do so willingly, from deep in their hearts, thanks to the lack of theory. How is the Duke not like this, that day when Duke chose the country over Pingting, resulting in violating the promise of the sixth?"

Chu Beijie was indifferent at first but was suddenly full of emotion upon her words. His voice became serious, "Please continue, Princess."

"Country or people, which is more important? It is not a problem solved by trade-offs." Yaotian paused for effect before leisurely continuing, "Duke may have thought that the ancestors of our history have decided to unite together to resist external enemies and resist violence in order to live better, so they have their own happiness. Only then did countries begin to form. The fundamental roots of a country has always been its people. What is there to live for, the moment a person sacrifices their happiness to protect the country? What is the point in remembering a man who only knows how to protect the country and doesn't understand the importance of cherishing their happiness?"

Chu Beijie's body began to shake. His grip tightened around the reins, only hearing Yaotian continue with, "And how could a man who, for his own search for happiness, is willing to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers to form an army that steals others' happiness, be the hero that Bai Pingting truly loves? Think, Duke, do all of these soldiers in your hands really wish to fight a battle for a single woman?"

Yaotian sighed once and lowered her voice. "What Bai Pingting wants is for Duke's eyes to open, be able to see what needs to be appreciated in this world, who is to be cherished. She wants you to see that even in the ant colonies. They have freedom and ambition but always in sight of their own happiness."

Chu Beijie's teeth were tightly clenched and for the longest time, he was speechless.

In the morning light, Pingting's smile had been gentle like water but now it had melted into all lakes and seas, not leaving any trace to be found.

The fundamental roots of a country has always been its people.

If it wasn't done willingly from the heart, why force oneself to sacrifice the things dearest to them in exchange for the country's reputation?

Country and people were not two separate choices, but one.

Only those who listened to their heart, loved what they loved and hated what they hated, were real people.

Chu Beijie abruptly raised his head at the sky, laughing to the skies as his tears slid along his cheeks. He lowered his voice, "Thank you for pointing these out, Princess."

A letter was slowly handed out of the curtain.

"Yaotian only had a few experiences, not enough to be worthy of your praise. Those words came from Miss Bai's letter."

Chu Beijie got off the horse, taking the wavering letter as tender as newborn babies. A shiver ran up his spine, "Thank you, Princess. I swear to Princess that the Dong Lin army will withdraw immediately."

Yaotian hadn't expected that he would so cleanly decide his withdrawal. She

hesitated slightly, before asking, “Is Duke not afraid this letter is false and that Miss Bai is still in imprisonment?”

Chu Beijie laughed. “If Pingting hadn’t confidence, why would she ask Princess to pass on a letter? Handwriting can be forged but can wise words be?”

He turned his horse and rode back to his army. Chen Mu had become impatient early in his wait and hurriedly came forwards to ask, “What on earth did the Princess of Yun Chang say?”

“Withdraw the troops.”

“What?”

Chu Beijie chuckled for a long time. “Withdraw! We’re not fighting a battle anymore.”

Even though everyone was secretly stunned by this, they were also pleasantly surprised. Some people asked, “What about the Duchess then?”

“I’ll look for her myself.” Chu Beijie gazed into the depths of the sky, determination filling his eyes. “I will find her, even if she is at the end of the world.”

God have mercy, please bless me with Pingting.

You can fly towards the sky with your wings. Chu Beijie is willing to follow you until the ends of the earth.

From today on, I will love what I love and hate what I hate.

I understand what I want to do and understand what I should do.

I understand what I should appreciate and therefore shall appreciate; what I should sever ties with and therefore shall sever ties with.

I understand that country and home, country and people, have always been one.

I understand that sacrifice is not great, but only by appreciating the people I love, can a country thrive. That in itself is a powerful pair of wings that soars towards ambition, just like how flowing red blood does the same.

Pingting, Pingting, I have heard the voice of my heart.

It says that life after life, it must never part from you.

Even if the earth shatters or the highest power tries to interfere, this feeling will always endure.

“Withdraw the army!”

“Withdraw! Withdraw!”

The army of Dong Lin withdrew and the final battle was stopped at the final moment.

Chu Beijie gazed into the horizon, not able to see that familiar body. But he would go to find her, he had to find her and lovingly protect her as he accompanies her under the stars, as she plays qin or as she watches the stars in the snow.

Together they would watch over the growing children, teaching him not to go astray and be shackled by dark depression. He will then always remember that morality comes from the heart and only by listening to the voice of the heart, can one never be blindfolded by the world.

Let him understand that people have their own dignity, people have their own ambition, people have their own freedom and people have their own happiness.

These were not things that national interests or the moral good could deprive them of.

Because, the fundamental roots of a country has always been one thing – its people.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 45

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch45

There were always a few unpredictable days.

Just after two days of sun, the sky began to scowl again. Dense clouds hung overhead, darkly shrouding both near and far mountains.

Zuiju studied the sky and sighed. “Looks like another snowstorm.”

Pingting leaned against the rock as she ascended the sleeping mountain slope. She was slightly panting as she silently assessed the blurry figures of people drifting far away below her. “Xiaoyang Mountain is just ahead. After that checkpoint, we’ll be in Bei Mo. Worry about the snowstorm later.”

Zuiju nodded.

Their initial bags had been stolen by officials while they were guests at an old couple’s cabin. They no longer had any money or clothes. They would doctor the occasional sick person to earn back a little but overall, it was another additional worry on their journey. Their tender hands had been rubbed until they formed a cocoon layer.

Today they saw one of the checkpoints to get to Bei Mo, Xiaoyang Mountain. The two heaved a sigh of relief. When they got to Bei Mo, Yangfeng would surely help them settle in. The two helped support each other down from the top of the mountain. They were much more careful than setting off. After all, they had experienced countless hardships on their journey from the capital of Yun Chang to here. They quietly hid themselves in the forest trail, lurking at the edge of the road as they studied the movement on the Xiaoyang Mountain.

A few people resembling merchants led a cart, ready to pass the checkpoint. As if knowing that a snowstorm would soon come, the leader of the merchants peered at the skies anxiously. He took out a bag of coins from his arms and stuffed it into the captain of the guards. He held his hands as he begged, “Sir, look at this weather. A snowstorm is about to come, even if people can last, our livestock cannot. Please spare us and let us cross without further ado. I exit every month at least three or four times, so how could I possibly not have an approved exit pass? It’s just that this checkpoint never checks for it, so today is a bit sudden...”

“So you’re blaming us, eh?” The captain harrumphed. “It never used to be checked, because our superiors never told us to check. A war is going on now. A war, do ya understand? The documents are hung over there and if you’re literate enough, then read them yourself. It’s clearly written. Without an approved exit pass, you cannot cross this checkpoint.”

In the bushes, the two who overheard their conversation exchanged a worried glance.

“This place is just like Hemeng Mountain, only those with an approved exit pass are allowed to cross.” Zuiju’s face was sad, “What to do? We spent all that bitter effort rushing over from the Hemeng Mountain.”

Pingting’s deep black eyes stared at the narrow gap between the old doors of the Xiaoyang Mountain gate. “It seems that all of the checkpoints from Yun Chang to Bei Mo have been strictly ordered to only allow those with an approved exit pass to cross.”

She should of thought of it earlier. Checkpoint inspections were bound to be strengthened when war dawned.

Yun Chang couldn’t possibly allow surprise attacks from Bei Mo that would significantly injure them while caught up with the battle against Dong Lin.

“What to do?”

“No other choice.” Pingting raised her head, looking at the towering mountains obscured by clouds.

This stretch of mountains separated the two countries, Yun Chang and Bei Mo.

Checkpoints had been set on all of the slightly lower mountains. In the winter, the forests in the tall mountains were bitterly freezing and the animals were starving. Only madmen would attempt to cross that way.

“Miss?” Zuiju looked at her uneasily.

Pingting calmly smiled. “Since we can’t get through the checkpoint, then might as well cross the Songsen Mountains.”

“Such risk...” Zuiju began, “Why not stay around at the borders for a while and wait...” Her gaze rested on Pingting’s belly and paused.

Pingting shook her head. “The checkpoint won’t relax, it’ll only get stricter. Princess Yaotian should have already hurried to the frontlines by now. He Xia will quickly realise which direction we have fled in. I know He Xia’s power very well. The moment he comes back from leading the army on the battlefield, he’ll immediately intervene with the border checkpoints to capture us. When that happens, we will never have another opportunity to leave Yun Chang again.”

Zuiju looked at the dark Songsen Mountain forests under the heavy clouds and took a deep breath of cold air. However, she quickly calmed down. “Before we climb the mountains, I would like to pick some medicinal herbs. Mo grass, used to prevent miscarriage, is only found at the foot of mountains.”

Pingting planned that by the time she had crossed the Songsen mountains, the deciding battle between Yun Chang and Dong Lin had already been dissolved by the letter Yaotian deliver.

He Xia sat on the horse, icily watching the Dong Lin’s army withdraw troop by troop.

The smoke in the air dissipated.

After the tension in the string was released, only infinite loneliness and disappointment remained.

Hundreds of thousands of troops had been sent for this occasion, but suddenly the most supreme flag of Yun Chang had appeared at the battlefield. He was the highest ranking general of Yun Chang. In its history he had not known anything about this at all in advance.

Under the numerous pairs of eyes that watched, Chu Beijie and Yaotian calmly talked without a care from a carriage in the gap between the two armies.

He had watched Chu Beijie ride his horse back and heard the crisp sound of the Dong Lin army's command.

He understood everything that had happened.

"The Dong Lin army is withdrawing?"

"The Dong Lin army has withdrawn!"

From beside, from behind, every inch of the ground, from every Yun Chang soldier that had been waiting for certain death on the battlefield the rumbling sound of pleasant surprise came.

His vice general turned to him, lowering his voice as he reported, "Prince Consort, the Dong Lin army has withdrawn."

He Xia's eyes were suddenly sombre.

At that moment, he had the urge to pull his sword out of its scabbard and order attack. Both armies had approximately the same number of soldiers, but since the Dong Lin army was withdrawing, the sudden rush forwards from the other meant they were certain to gain the upper hand.

As long as they were able to rush forwards, he was sure that he could cut off Chu Beijie's head.

Hand clutching tightly to the hilt of the sword, He Xia struggled to suppress the desires that surged into his heart.

He couldn't send out the order.

Even if he pulled out his sword, the army would not listen to his orders.

Yaotian was there, and the most supreme flag of Yun Chang was waving in the sky. He was just the Prince Consort, or even just a general.

"Prince Consort, the army of Dong Lin has retreated." His vice repeated his report again, in a whisper.

He Xia's face was ashen and finally let a tiny, cold smile surface onto his face. "I see."

He smiled as his gaze watched Yaotian's carriage slowly roll towards the army. In that lonely yet elaborately decorated carriage, his wife, the master of Yun Chang, sat.

The huge army immediately silenced.

The person that had resolved the war was the sole master of Yun Chang and the only person all soldiers were loyal to – Princess Yaotian.

The carriage quietly trotted forwards before stopping quietly before the troops, the withdrawing Dong Lin army behind it. The carriage was now in front of thousands of soldiers, He Xia included.

Yaotian was sitting in the carriage. Her body had been wrapped in layers of heavy clothing, but she still felt chilling waves of unease.

After convincing Chu Beijie, she had another difficult problem to face. It seemed that He Xia's gaze pierced through the thick cloth of the carriage's window. She couldn't summon her courage to open it to face him.

Bai Pingting was no longer in the Prince Consort Residence.

Gone.

Regardless of the ten million reasons that justified this happening as good, Bai Pingting's departure remained a fact.

On the way there, she had already thought of many reasons to explain it.

Should there be a reasonable, honourable way for the master of Yun Chang to persuade with force or gentleness? Or use a woman's honesty to tell He Xia? Perhaps carry all sadness herself...

It was no use. At the last minute, all this was useless.

The carriage stood quietly where it stopped. In Yaotian's mind, only the huge figure of He Xia on his horse was in front of her.

At this time, she heard the crisp sound of a sword being unsheathed.

So crisp, so sweet, a hint of determination and resolution.

No one else had such a way of unsheathing their sword, apart from the man who had her deepest love.

Prince Consort, Prince Consort, do you hate Yaotian?

Do you want to kill me?

Yaotian closed her eyes.

He Xia stared deeply into the carriage, through the closed curtains, as he unsheathed his sword.

The sword stretched out, quivering without end. He Xia then directed it towards the sky, using all of his effort until exhausted. He roared, "Long live the Princess!"

"Long live the Princess!"

"Long live the Princess!"

"Hooray! Hooray! Long live the Princess!"

The people behind him continued his chant, their voices like thunder.

"Hooray!"

"Long live the Princess!"

On the plains, the echoes continued to roar back.

The curtain before them slowly began to lift, and a face appeared before He Xia.

"Princess."

"Prince Consort..." Yaotian whispered back.

"Thank you, Princess."

Yaotian stared at the handsome face that she could never have enough of and whispered, "Why thank me, Prince Consort? Prince Consort knows that I have released Bai Pingting who Prince Consort has spent so much effort in acquiring to make Dong Lin's army withdraw."

He Xia's expression was the usual. He intently studied Yaotian for a while before leisurely sighing, "After this incident, I know that Princess' love for me is true."

"Princess Consort!" Yaotian's tears could no longer be stopped. They poured

out, not caring about the crowd. She pounced into He Xia's warm chest. In his embrace, Yaotian cried, "Yaotian released Bai Pingting and hence betrayed Prince Consort."

"Princess is wrong." He Xia softly stroked his wife in his arms, whispering, "Only the woman who know true love are able to feel jealousy. To let Pingting leave alive, He Xia is...very grateful to Princess."

Yaotian trembled slightly in He Xia's arms. Having his broad shoulders beside her gave her unlimited courage.

He Xia's voice was soft and warm. The flag of the Dong Lin's army was reflected in his eyes as they moved faraway.

If Pingting went, she would not stay in Yun Chang nor return to Dong Lin.

The only direction she would go was towards Bei Mo.

On the Songsen mountains, a snowstorm was soon to arrive.

Pingting and Zuiju's footsteps were sometimes deep, other times shallow in the snow. They kept moving upwards breathlessly.

"The snowstorm is coming."

"Could we get to the rocky area before then?"

Pingting considered it. "I'm afraid no."

Zuiju's heart sank and began to feel anxious. "Then what are we to do? We're in a forest in winter. Leafless trees are everywhere. The snow cannot be stopped anywhere, so we'll freeze to death." Her ten thin fingers were tightly clutched to their only bag.

They had managed to earn some money from giving medical help to a few people in the last few days. Apart from buying a regulation set of silver needles for doctors and food, they had spent the rest on warm clothing. However, even though they were wearing the thickest clothing they had, there was no chance of protecting them from lasting a snowstorm outside. Pingting raised her head, staring at the sky that had quickly been covered with heavy clouds. The snow had not begun. There was no trace of wind yet, but the shadows were brewing in the clouds.

“Zuiju, light the fire.”

“Geez, why light the fire at such a time? When the wind and snow comes, fire is no use at all.”

Pingting calmly replied, “Light the fire and boil water.” A leisurely smile surfaced on her delicate face.

Zuiju wanted to say more, but seeing the smile in Pingting’s lips made her helplessly swallow her words back down her throat. “Fine, I’ll light the fire and boil water,” she answered.

She took out the matches, a few dry branches from the forest and quickly set up a fire on the windless, snowy plains.

“Dig a hole in the snow.”

The snow was very loose and the two dug with their hands, their knees touching the ground. In a short while, their hands had already reached the mud beneath the snow. The mud had absorbed much more heat and was much more difficult to dig through than the snow.

Zuiju frowned. “It’s not deep again, let’s dig a little more.”

“No need,” Zuiju replied. “Create a small tent with the twigs.”

There was not much time left and the black clouds were swimming rapidly overhead, as if anxious to find an outlet to vent out of. A little tent had then been set up over the hole with twigs. Pingting had found many leaves and deftly scattered them over the shed.

Zuiju scrambled up to help her, her voice becoming more urgent. “This will fall with just one gust of wind. What’s the point?”

After scattering enough leaves, Pingting opened up the bag and removed the two remaining clean spare clothing. She spread it over the shelter.

“Miss, what are you doing that for?”

“Bring me the water and pour it over this.”

“It’s not boiled yet,” said Zuiju, hesitating.

Pingting was both annoyed and amused. “Melting the ice is enough. What do I

need boiled water for?”

Zuiju looked at the little tent and then back at the pot of melted ice. Realisation suddenly dawned her, “Oh! Oh!” Understanding suddenly lighted up in her big eyes. “Yes, yes! I’ll bring it over.”

They poured the melted ice over the shelter, causing the clothes and the leaves that covered the shelter to absorb its moisture. Instantly, a thin layer of ice appeared on the outermost layer of clothing.

“How handy!” Zuiju happily began to laugh.

“Don’t laugh so soon, the water isn’t enough. Hurry up and get some more.”

“Yes, yes, going now.”

Moving back and forth, the fire kept melting the ice blocks.

Pot and pots kept on being poured onto the shelter. The ice on the outside became thicker and stronger.

Zuiju carried the pot, poured it over and finally asked, “Is this enough?” The water had been poured onto the top of the tent and it poured down every corner and had already been frozen into a layer ice before reaching the snowy ground.

“This snowstorm isn’t light.” Pingting studied the surging dark clouds overhead. “Melt a bit more.”

Rumble...

There were a series of muffled thunder deeply embedded in the storm clouds. A long distance seemed to have been crossed before finally reaching the ground.

On the dreary snowy plains, perhaps there was a cold breeze. Perhaps not.

Pingting’s expression suddenly changed. “Not enough time to melt more. Hurry up and hide in here. She grabbed Zuiju and the two through themselves into the little pre-made entrance. The two nested inside as there was very little room, tightly hugging onto each other.

“It’s so warm inside.” Even though they were a bit squashed, Zuiju’s sigh was still comfortable.

The wind had already begun to howl.

Half of the shed was in the snow, while the other half had a brick-like roof made of ice. It should be strong enough to help them resist the snowstorm.

Pingting and Zuiju nervously listened to the scary sounds of movement outside.

Contrarily to the outside world, the inside of the shelter was extraordinarily quiet.

“We should be able to pass through the Songsen mountains right?”

Pingting remained silent. Only after a long time did she reply, “Yes, we should.”

“Miss?”

“Hm.”

“Are you thinking about something?”

“Yeah.”

“Thinking about what?”

Pingting moved ever so slightly as slowly answered, “Zuiju, no matter how long the snowstorm goes outside, no matter how warm it is in here, we must never fall asleep. If the snow covers the entrance gap, and we’ve fallen asleep, then we will suffocate to death.”

Zuiju was indeed sleepy from the very warm environment. This news startled her. She was instantly removed of her weariness. She replied, “Understood.” She couldn’t help sigh at this though.

The shelter was very quiet. Not to mention, the two were pressed tightly to each other, so Pingting obviously heard her sigh.

“What are you sighing for?” Pingting asked.

“Nothing much.”

There was silence for a brief while. Pingting softly asked, “Are you thinking that if we do end up suffocating to death here, no one will ever know of our whereabouts forever?”

Zuiju couldn't help sighing again. "Miss Bai, why are you so clever?"

The corners of Pingting's mouth twitched. Out of it came a bitterly twisted smile.

Another silence fell on the small tent.

Sometime later, Zuiju couldn't help asking in a small voice, "If we really were to give our lives up on the Songsen Mountains..."

"It won't happen." Pingting interrupted her words, softening her voice "It won't happen, Zuiju."

A sour taste rose to the tip of her nose. Zuiju didn't understand why her eyes suddenly became red. She fumbled and stretched out her hand to touch the tips of Pingting's fingers. She clutched tightly onto her slender hand.

The two hands full of blisters, yet still dexterous, clenched together in the darkness.

In the quiet world, Zuiju's breathing suddenly stopped.

The breathing that had abruptly stopped was highly unusual. Pingting waited quietly while Zuiju made no movement on her wrist, as if waiting quietly too.

After a long time had passed, Zuiju released her held breath. The breathing that floated towards Pingting's ears seemed more anxious than before.

"Miss Bai, your pulse is...very weak." Zuiju's voice was also anxious. "I must immediately treat you with acupuncture."

"No need to hurry, Zuiju." Pingting lightly replied.

"No, it must be done immediately." Zuiju habitually reached out her hand to look for the bag which knocked into the hardened wall of the shelter, making it feel sore.

Where was the bag?

Zuiju suddenly stiffened.

"We came in a rush." In the darkness, Pingting's voice was very soft and collected. "Zuiju, the bag is still outside. Remember? It's left where I took out the spare clothing."

The snow furiously pounded against the solid roof, producing a terrifying sound.

The deathly silence inside and the raging howl of the wind outside were two very different worlds.

A light flashed in the dark depths of Zuiju's eyes. She did not hesitate long before she clenched her teeth. "I will get it back, it should be nearby. I'll grab it the moment I move out."

"No." Pingting lightly spat out a word.

Zuiju suddenly realised that Pingting had positioned herself to fully block the entrance. There was no way she could wriggle her way out.

"Miss Bai, I understand your concern, but I must bring the needles back." Zuiju lowered her voice. "I am a doctor."

In the darkness, the outline of Pingting's figure seemed hazy, as if the dull world had blended into her. Yet her fragile body was as dignified and stable as a mountain.

"Zuiju, do you even know where the needles are? No one knows where it has been hurled to by the wind after a snowstorm has started."

"Perhaps it has been caught in a nearby branch. I can still go to look for it." She continued forwards and collided into Pingting's arms. Her fingers slipped around her wrist and finally onto her hand, "Miss Bai, like I said before, that I will do everything to protect you and your child."

Pingting's body refused to budge. She stood there like a statue of thousands of years. Her hand returned the tight grasp of Zuiju's hand.

"I've also said before that we won't die. It won't happen, Zuiju."

The two freezing, slender hands tightly held each other, causing the slight warmth from being bonded to slowly rise.

The space in the shed was much too small. Zuiju could only push Pingting away.

"But, your child..." Zuiju's heard her own voice, carrying a low sob, in the pitch black darkness. She loosened her clenched hand and used her fingertips to

explore Pingting's pulse once more.

After detecting a disordered skin, she lifted her slightly trembling fingers.

A warm liquid dripped onto her skirt.

In the silent darkness, the sound of her teardrops falling was heard very clearly.

Needles, how could she have forgotten the most important needles?

On the journey, she had continuously used medicinal herbs as well as needles to strengthen Pingting's body and stabilise her pulse. Why had she forgotten them when the snowstorm was about to fall?

Where was the roaring storm outside going to blow the bag with the needles to?

Zuiju could never forget this cruel storm in her life.

"Don't worry, the child will be fine."

Had she heard wrong?

In Pingting's voice, there was a deep sense of gentleness and calmness.

Zuiju felt the messy pulse on her wrist. There calm, faint words were like needles stabbing at Zuiju's heart.

In the darkness, she heard Pingting stifling a chuckle, her voice as gentle as a sweet dream. "The child in my belly is obediently sleeping. I am his mother and will protect him. The storm is fierce but he is in me, very warm and very safe."

Hearing Pingting's voice, Zuiju could almost see the corners of her mouth lifting into a small smile.

Gentle and touching, like the first rain of spring.

Pingting was indeed smiling.

The worst imperfections always came at the most terrible moments.

In the snowstorm, she had remembered the bag and in it, the needles. At the same time, she knew there was no going back. The roaring storm on the snowy plains was not only good at grabbing bags, but also grabbing away the lives of

living people.

She knew her pulse was chaotic.

Her head was a little dizzy and her eyes were blurred. She did not know whether it was the darkness or some other reason. Her energy seemed to be pumped away, whisp by whisp.

But even so, she had to smile more.

“Don’t worry about my child and me, Zuiju. We’ll get through this snow.”

Although this child is young, he is not as fragile as you think.

He was conceived in winter.

In his mother’s womb, he could feel the peace of the secluded residence, hear the qin sound that touched the four countries, admired the heartbreakingly bright moon. He had seen the fire that raged in the night sky, the snowy ground died red from fresh blood, as well as boarded the carriage with his mother to leave, full of despair and sorrow.

This child will be stronger than me, more courageous.

His father is the world-famous general, the never to be defeated Duke of Zhen-Bei.

In his veins, the blood of Chu Beijie flows.

The most powerful blood of this world.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 46

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch46

In the early morning, orange light filtered through the thick layers of clouds, causing a little haziness.

The sound of hooves shattered the tranquillity as it hurried on the snow-covered path.

Bada, bada, bada bump...

A horse came from afar and the military flag of emergencies had been placed on its back to ensure it was untampered on its journey.

“Open the door! Hurry, open the city gates! The Dong Lin army has withdrawn! The Dong Lin army has withdrawn!”

The messenger had his head raised as he yelled at the closed gates, excited joy hung in his words despite his fatigue.

The guards at the city gates strained their ears in disbelief. They peered down, asking incredulously, “What did you just say, Bro?”

“Hurry up and open the gates! I’ve got to report it to the Senior Official. Dong Lin has withdrawn!”

“The Dong Lin army has withdrawn! Dong Lin has withdrawn! The war is over!”

The heavy city gates emitted a deep rumbling sound as they slowly opened. The news of the Dong Lin army’s withdrawal seemed to have acquired wings as it swept through the air of the capital of Yun Chang, sweeping the unease from everyone’s heart.

“Senior Official, Senior Official! The army of Dong Lin has withdrawn!”

Although he had long mentally prepared for himself, the elderly and experienced Gui Changqing couldn't help abruptly sitting up from his bed. "Have they really withdrawn?"

"Yes, the Princess herself went to bargain with Chu Beijie, and soon after, the Dong Lin army withdrew." The messenger was kneeling as he clearly and simply reported the events. "My army has sent out a significant amount of spies to closely monitor the trends in the Dong Lin army's movement. There is nothing strange at all. They really are withdrawing."

Gui Changqing dressed in the clothes that his servants had brought forth while asking, "Where is the Princess and the Prince Consort?"

"The Princess and Prince Consort are currently on the way, leading the troops back to the capital."

"We must prepare a grand welcome." Gui Changqing turned back, his expression full of delight. "Go, get the Official of Public Events to come here immediately, as well as all those officials in charge of procurement, ceremonies and entertainment. Wait..." He thought for a while before continuing his ordering, "In this battle between Dong Lin and Yun Chang, there were still a number of sons of Yun Chang that were injured or killed. Bring the official of military affairs, so we may talk about pensions and such."

The manservant, who was to pass on the message hurriedly nodded, wrote them down, and turned to go.

Rumble rumble rumble!

A few rumbling, booming sounds came, shaking the dust from the corners of the roof. All of the people in the room were shocked by this and even Gui Changqing's expression changed. "What on earth has happened in the capital? Go check!"

Not long later, the manservant quickly returned from task. "Report to Senior Official, the news of the Dong Lin army's withdrawal has reached the capital. Everyone is awake and is drinking, singing and dancing on the streets. Firecrackers have been lit everywhere and the biggest firepowder shop in the capital has taken out the most precious, biggest firecracker of the capital. Those sounds just then were from that. Would Senior Official like to arrest them?"

Gui Changqing understood the moment he heard his words. He shook his head. “Arrest them for what reason? Who doesn’t have sons or younger brothers in the army? Now that the war is over, the peasants are happy, meaning that our worries can finally be put to rest too.” He then ordered, “Someone go and take out one thousand and two hundred silver coins to buy alcohol. Put it all out in the square at front of the Royal Residence so the peasants may take them freely.”

His servants laughed. “Senior Official, the cellar and warehouse of the Royal Residence is full to the brim. There is no need to use silver coins to buy alcohol from the peasants.”

“Those are all for when the Princess and Prince Consort return to the Royal Residence. I’m afraid our warehouse will not have enough for all those generals and soldiers. Such delightful news!” Thinking of war meant a significant loss to his country, yet there were no significant casualties in the end. Gui Changqing was extremely content. Gui Changqing had contributed to Yun Chang’s constant policy of no attack over the years.

Not long later, the messenger he had first sent out hurried back, report, “The Officials have been welcomed here and are currently waiting for Senior Official in the atrium.”

“Okay.” Gui Changqing quickly tidied his grand robes once more before stepping outside the door.

He took the main trail through the Senior Official Residence, bypassing the garden and planning continue to the atrium straight ahead. Happy, his steady pace became lighter. When he arrived by the pond with a thin layer of ice on top, he suddenly heard a familiar voice of his messenger straining his voice as he shouted, “Report! Emergency report from the army! Report!” The voice came closer as the person who yelled desperately hurried towards him.

Gui Changqing’s heart throbbed once.

Dong Lin’s army had already withdrawn, what other urgent news could the frontlines bring?

Had the situation changed?

“You can go,” said Gui Changqing, turning back to the servants behind him.

The messenger had already arrived before his eyes as he turned.

Gui Changqing stopped moving on the steps leading to a bridge. He lowered his voice, asking, “Perhaps the Dong Lin army feined withdrawal?”

This messenger had just gotten off the horse and had been puffing as he ran. He shook his head, “No, I am not from the frontlines.”

“Oh?” Gui Changqing’s anxiety cooled down slightly, “Say what news you bring then.”

“Report to Senior Official, the checkpoints on the way from my Yun Chang to Bei Mo keeps on being breached.”

“Checkpoints at Tonglin, Hemeng, Xiaoyang, Yunliao Mountains have all been breached. The intruder is not a soldier from Bei Mo but a man who comes from the direction of my Yun Chang.”

Gui Changqing asked in surprised, “A man?”

“Yes.” Even the messenger’s face was full of disbelief. “With just a horse, he consecutively breached four of Yun Chang’s checkpoints. The man came as a surprise. His skill with swords is very good. Because of the battle with Dong Lin, most of the elite level soldiers once placed on the checkpoints were deployed at the frontlines, so the remaining ones don’t dare to oppose this man.”

Gui Changqing thought for a moment, then asked, “General Chang is in one of the nearby towns. Had he not heard about this?”

“General Chang’s elite soldiers were also taken away by the Prince Consort. When he heard about this, he immediately dispatched all of his remaining men to crush this person. However, this man is too powerful and elusive. He appears to specialise in hiding his tracks by only appearing when there are less people at a checkpoint. He comes and goes calmly so when the main unit arrives, his shadows are long gone. General Chang couldn’t do anything about him, so he could only order the closure of all checkpoints to prevent them from being breached again.”

“Seeing how he as breached four checkpoints consecutively, it seems that it

isn't to reach Bei Mo."

"No. It seems that every time that person breaches a checkpoint, he will always grab the leader asking the whereabouts of a woman. He always has a portrait in his hands, one of a woman. He only asks whether the people of every checkpoint whether they have seen that woman before and if they knew the direction she went. This person is very brave and well-built. If a normal person is placed before him not just his sword just the gaze is enough to chill their hearts."

Gui Changqing already had some clue of what was happening by now. He smiled instead, "Do you know who this person is?"

The messenger was surprised and asked, "This man always wears a black mask, obscuring his face. Only his eyes show. How could Senior Official know who he is?"

The corners of Gui Changqing's lifted into a knowing smile. He held his hands behind his back as gazed up at the brightening sky. He sighed, lamenting, "Who else apart from him? He is no other than Chu Beijie."

The news of Dong Lin army's withdrawal had only just reached the capital, but Chu Beijie had already breached four checkpoints. It was a truly outrageous speed.

He must've set off alone immediately issuing the withdrawal order.

Chu Beijie's anxiety was evident.

"Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei?" The messenger was taken aback, his wide eyes stared for a long time before he exhaling. He shook his head, "No wonder, he's so strong. I will leave the capital tonight and pass on this important news to General Chang."

Military news were very important to the country. Only the very loyal and intelligent soldiers were allowed to be messengers. Their minds were many times much more flexible than ordinary soldiers.

The messenger was slightly hesitant before he continued, "I boldly make the statement that because Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei led troops to attack my Yun Chang, he is the enemy of my Yun Chang. Now that he alone is in Yun Chang's

borders, this is a wonderful opportunity to eradicate this person.”

Gui Changqing had long thought about this. However, Chu Beijie was the worry of the other three countries too. No one wanted to touch him. Chu Beijie alone on his horse, going in and out of Yun Chang, was like an elaborately made, warm dessert placed in front of starving people. Although Gui Chang was wise and old, he struggled hard to restrain himself from the idea of immediately ordering the troops to capture Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie would not be easy to capture.

In the snow-capped Songsen mountains, getting the army to surround a well-hidden famous general was an impossibly difficult thing to do.

It was difficult to capture a person like Chu Beijie and even harder to find a good chance.

Not to mention...

“What use is it even if the army is mobilised and kill Chu Beijie in one fell swoop?” Gui Changqing smiled bitterly as he shook his head, reluctantly letting go of this enticing idea. “If the news were to spread, the withdrawing Dong Lin army will immediately rush forwards. This time, they will undoubtedly battle until the very last soldier stands.”

This peace they had worked so hard on would be destroyed in a single moment.

This was something that Gui Changqing did not want to see at all.

The messenger had long heard of Chu Beijie’s fame and understood that Gui Changqing’s words were correct. He couldn’t continue to be bold and knelt down. “Messenger will leave the capital tonight. Does Senior Official have any other instructions?”

“Pass this message onto General Chang. Two things. One, don’t send any more troops to surround or attack Chu Beijie. This man is extremely aggressive and courageous. He is impossible to kill and will result in meaningless casualties amongst my Yun Chang’s soldiers. Not to mention, the war has only just finished so no need to further anger an enemy general. As for the checkpoints, he is only looking for a person, not intending to harm, so there is no need for resistance.

Second..." Gui Changqing hesitated for a moment, the light in his eyes flashed. He lowered his voice, "Tell all the people at the checkpoints that no matter what, they mustn't let Chu Beijie meet that woman."

"Yes."

"Remember the second in your heart."

"Yes, I understand."

Gui Changqing watched him, unsatisfied, as he began to depart. His eyes uneasily swept across his surroundings. There was an empty lake beside him, a bridge covered with snow in front where no one could hide without being noticed. Gui Changqing asked the messenger again, "Are you familiar with the Songsen Mountains?"

"I have always been stationed on the Songsen Mountains and is very familiar with the terrain shape of the Songsen Mountains."

"What is your name and what is your job title in the army?"

"Report to Senior Official. My name is Fanlu and is a Vice-General."

"I will now raise you to Valiant General."

"Eh?" Fanlu looked up, stunned. He realised from Gui Changqing's serious expression that it was not a joke. His eyes brightened as he loudly replied, "Thank you, Senior Official! I will definitely do my best to repay Senior Official."

Gui Changqing stepped down the stairs, helping him up as he whispered, "I have a third message, one only for you to hear. It shall come out of my mouth and only enter your ears."

"Yes." Fanlu sternly replied, his voice lowered as he turned his ears towards Gui Changqing.

"That woman may be around the Songsen Mountains and must never be reunited with Chu Beijie. You must find her quicker than Chu Beijie."

"Kill her?"

"No," Gui Changqing replied in a whisper, "no marks on her body that indicates a death due to humans."

The cruel light that only soldiers glinted in Fanlu's eyes. "There are wild beasts out there throughout the year. I know what to do."

"Have you seen her drawing?"

"No, the drawing has only been seen by the guards Chu Beijie grabbed. However, there are very few women who dare to walk around on the Songsen Mountains."

"Remember, she has a luminous jade hairpin on herself. That was the only ornament that never left her side since her departure from Dong Lin to Yun Chang.

Zuiju had forgotten how long she had waited in the darkness. Every minute, every second tugged at her heart. The suffering from it had already continued a few rounds in the darkness. She lightly held Pingting's wrist, refusing to let go of it. It seemed that if she did, she would forever lose Pingting's whereabouts. The air rumbled with the two's breathing.

Dear God, please protect Miss Pingting and her child through this obstacle.

She felt a wetness on her face. The tears that came down filtered into her skin.

"When will the storm be over?" Zuiju tried very hard to make those words a little calmer, without making a tearful voice.

"Perhaps it'll stop soon," Pingting replied softly.

The calmer she was, the more chaotic Zuiju's heart was. After an awkward silence, Zuiju's voice was heard again. "I really hate the Duke," she whispered.

"Zuiju."

"I hate the Duke to death, hate him." Zuiju had her teeth clenched and grinded them.

She could only blame him and could only hate him. Why, when he had such great abilities, did the woman he love suffer like this?

"It's all the Duke's fault. It's all his fault. Aren't men supposed to protect women? Should the woman they love not be protected in the palm of their hand?" The more she thought, the angrier she became. The more she spoke, the more agitated she became.

Pingting sighed once and took Zuiju's hand in hers. She stroked it, calming her down. "Zuiju, don't say any more."

"He should be here. It'd be great if he was the one here with you."

The words that should've never been said came flooding out, rapidly bringing a silence to the narrow space. Zuiju only suddenly realised that she must have been driven crazy by the darkness and the storm outside.

Chu Beijie, if Chu Beijie were here, then what was this storm? His shoulders were very broad and could shield Pingting from the harsh weather.

"Miss, I..." Zuiju secretly regretted it. "I shouldn't've mentioned him."

"You're right." Pingting sadly replied. "It would be great if he were here."

It would indeed be great if they could not be parted, even if the highest power tried to tear them apart.

The storm hid the daylight. The Songsen Mountains had become a patch of gloomy white. The wind began to howl, hitting hard against the rocky cliffs, producing a sharp whistling sound of dissatisfaction.

Chu Beijie sat in a gap between the rocks, stroking the precious sword in his hands.

He had spent almost all his life marching to war and seen storms a hundred times more terrible than this one. He had immediately secured the most sturdy cave against the storm upon entering the mountains.

The storm held no place in his heart. He silently waited for it to pass. Once the wind stopped, he would immediately go down the mountain and attempt to cross the Suyang checkpoint again.

Suyang was the weakest defended checkpoint of Yun Chang. If Pingting wanted to go to Bei Mo, she would most likely choose to cross there.

Perhaps Pingting would cross the Suyang checkpoint today.

But what if today was still without result? The depths of Chu Beijie's eyes began to dim even more.

In these past few days, he had consecutively breached four of Yun Chang's

checkpoints but no one at all of them had seen Pingting before. Could it be that Pingting hadn't headed for Bei Mo?

This made him feel very worried. If she stayed in Yun Chang, then even if Princess Yaotian was willing to free Pingting, He Xia would most likely not. He Xia would send out pursuing soldiers and perhaps arrive in a day or two.

Deafening thunder came from the sky, and the blood red lightning seemed to strike Chu Beijie's heart, piercing a gaping wound in his chest that caused everything that flowed out to plummet into the endless darkness. His body felt empty, except for the anxiety and distress that filled his heart.

Pingting, where are you?

Are you and our child in the mountains, in the snowstorm, somewhere on the bumpy road?

I only want to put my arms tightly around you, my body blocking yours from the howling snow.

If you allow me to do that much, I will be the happiest man most beloved by the gods.

"Where are you? Where on earth are you?" Chu Beijie gazed at the scabbard. The flowery pattern on it reminded him of the golden hairpins that swayed on Pingting's hair.

At that moment, he deeply desired to feel Pingting's warmth, to look at her calm, demure smile once more.

The howling of the wind began to fade. The earth had darkened, unlike before, indicating the prelude to the end of the snowstorm.

Chu Beijie's expression jolted. He suddenly lurched upwards.

If he was unable to find any news on the Suyang checkpoint, then it meant that Pingting had already found another way to go to Bei Mo.

And he would not hesitate going towards Bei Mo.

Even if he travelled to the end of the world, he had to find Pingting.

Zuiju almost thought she wouldn't be able to last to the end of the snowstorm.

She had prayed and begged to the heavens in all sorts of ways and although Pingting's pulse remained unstable, at least it didn't get worse.

"It seems the snowstorm is about to end."

In the darkness, she heard Pingting sigh in what seemed to be relief. "Really?" She had been sitting up with a straight spine the a longest time. It suddenly gave way like an exhausted man that had struggled with his last breath until he collapsed, reaching his destination.

"Miss!" Zuiju cried in panic.

Pingting barely managed to hold herself up. "Don't worry." Her tone was very weak.

Zuiju stretched out a hand, wiping away a forehead of cold sweat. "Does your chest feel stuffy?"

"Yeah," uttered Pingting.

"The snow is about to stop."

Pingting gently twisted her body a bit and revealed the entrance. Water had not been poured over it, so it had not formed part of the solid ice block. A corner of the clothing on the roof had fallen over the entrance. It was full of frozen condensation from the snowstorm. Pingting forcefully pushed at it, but the clothing and ice did not make even the slightest sound. After another push, a little light began to stream inside. Although it was just a little light, it was much more than the complete darkness before. Zuiju and Pingting instantly shivered twice.

It was indeed cold, but the snow had almost stopped. The fierce sound of snapping twigs in the wind gradually quietened down. Finally, they completely opened the entrance and wriggled outside.

The tent of ice, that had protected them through the catastrophe, gleamed crystal clear under the sun. It was so small that it was difficult to imagine that it had allowed two adults to escape the snowstorm.

The cold air flooded into their noses, bringing in the freshness unique smell of the mountain forests. They had somehow managed to survive and see the light

before them, the meaning of life valued more to them. Their spirits quickly brightened.

“Miss, let’s continue on our way.”

“Sure.”

“Allow me to check your pulse again. Does your chest still feel stuffy?”

Pingting shook her head. “It’s better.”

Zuiju studied her, hesitating for a moment.

Pingting was right. The snow broke a whole tree trunk, not to mention the bag which blew to somewhere far away long ago. They no longer had needles or herbs prepared before climbing the mountain.

Zuiju worriedly asked, “Should we still continue?”

“Yeah.”

“I hope God continues to bless us and let us find some herbs. Without silver needles, pine needles can do the trick for now.” Zuiju then continued, “You sit here for a while. I’ll go look for some pine needles. After a few pricks, you’ll be able to endure your uncomfortableness for a little longer.”

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 47

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch47

The Royal Residence of Dong Lin.

“Good news! Good news, my King!”

The Senior Official Chu Zairan was holding an army report and was practically running into the Royal Residence. His excited shouts were heard before he even entered the room.

The King of Dong Lin had been ill for several days and constantly felt groggy. The Queen was by the bed, personally attending the King of Dong Lin. She heard the shouts and happened to turn to see Chu Zairan stumble inside. “What good news?”

“Madam, the Duke of Zhen-Bei has withdrawn the army. The final battle did not start.”

The Queen was stunned by this. She hesitated for the longest time before asking in utter disbelief, “The Duke of Zhen-Bei didn’t go to war with the army of Yun Chang?”

Chu Zairan’s hand that held the army report shook and quivered constantly with excitement. “Nearly. I heard, when the two armies were ready to confront each other, the Princess of Yun Chang suddenly appeared and convinced the Duke of Zhen-Bei to withdraw. Madam, several hundred thousands of lives of Dong Lin’s sons have been saved!”

“Repeat what you just said,” said a man’s frail voice from the bed.

“Ah, King! Are you awake?” The Queen was taken aback and hurriedly

supported the struggling King of Dong Lin to sit up. “Be careful, King. The physician said you must heal in peace.”

The King of Dong Lin’s hand feebly waved a hand to dismiss the idea. He turned his gaze towards Chu Zairan. “Senior Official, please say that again. What did the Duke of Zhen-Bei do?”

“Replying to King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei has withdrawn the army. The army and Yun Chang did not begin the deciding battle.” Although Chu Zairan was very old, he had a lot of vigour to spare.

“Oh?” The King of Dong Lin chewed on Chu Zairan’s words as if still unable to accept this incredible news. His eyes were a little yellow from his sickness, giving a different quality to his eyes which then blended into his excited expression. Hand resting on the shoulder of the Queen, he peered forwards asking, “Where is the report? Hurry, let me see.”

Chu Zairan hurriedly passed over the report with both hands.

The Queen was incredibly worried about the King of Dong Lin overexerting himself. She personally helped him open the report. The King read it while leaning against a pillow.

The King of Dong Lin read the report twice before sighing in relief. He thought his body felt breezy, the sour pain and stuffiness felt in the previous days seemed to have flown off. He passed it over to the Queen, who closed the report, before smiling. “I know what Brother, Brother still thinks about the overall situation... cough cough cough...cough...” He suddenly began to continuously cough.

The Queen hurriedly massaged his back to increase airflow. She softened her voice, “You must be more aware of your body, King. The war is over, and the Duke of Zhen-Bei has stopped his craze. As long as King’s body gets better, then it is truly a blessing for all peasants of Dong Lin.”

The King of Dong Lin struggled to bit back his pain. He took a few deep breaths before asking, “Where is the army right now?”

“They are currently on the way back. The Duke of Zhen-Bei has given his order that when they get to the border, all are to disband and to immediately go back to their original stations.”

The King of Dong Lin considered this for a moment, before commanding, “Write a letter, Senior Official, and send it to the Duke of Zhen-Bei with a fast horse. Tell him that the previous letters I sent him were all words written in a fit of anger. The Royal House of Dong Lin only has us two brothers, and I still have a lot of hope for him. Tell him to come back as soon as possible and to never leave the capital again.”

Chu Zairan hesitated before stepping forward to report in a whisper, “King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei is no longer with the army. The army is currently led by Official Chen-Mu.”

The King and the Queen of Dong Lin were slightly surprised.

“No longer with the army?” The King of Dong Lin’s eyebrows that had just begun to relax, screwed up tightly again. He barely managed to sit up. “What’s this all about?”

“The general who passed on the messenger said that after the Duke of Zhen-Bei sent the order to withdraw, he passed the flag of command to Chen Mu. He then rode off alone, and his whereabouts are currently unknown.”

The clear skies that had just come out were suddenly covered up by rain clouds again. The King of Dong Lin sighed, flopped backwards and lethargically leaned on the head of the bed.

“Any news of Bai Pingting?” The Queen interrupted with a question.

“Bai Pingting’s whereabouts are currently unknown. There’s something else though...” Chu Zairan raised his eyes to study the King of Dong Lin’s expression and stopped.

“Go ahead and speak, Senior Official.”

“This...this is just a rumour, not confirmed.” Chu Zairan hunched over as he carefully proceeded, “It seems that when Bai Pingting was taken away by He Xia, she was already...”

The Queen was secretly alarmed by this and she hurriedly asked, “Already what?”

“...Already with the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s flesh and blood.”

When this came out, not only was the Queen but also the King was shocked.
“Is this true?”

“King, this is just a rumour...”

“The blood of my Royal House of Dong Lin was sent into He Xia’s hands?” The King of Dong Lin’s eyes were wide in anger. His breath suddenly got caught in his throat, sending him off with another fit of coughing.

The Queen’s heart felt completely frozen into blocks of ice. She clumsily helped to clear the King of Dong Lin’s airflow, tears already beginning to fall. Seeing the King of Dong Lin had stopped coughing, she stood up and slumped to her knees, crying, “King, it’s all my fault! This is a result of my sins.”

The King of Dong Lin was stiff for a long time. He heaved a sigh. “Queen is not at fault; it is mine. This is such a joke from the gods, my House of Dong Lin has finally had a seedling yet...Senior Official.”

“Here.”

“Immediately write an Order and send people to find Bai Pingting. She must be protected and the child in her belly.” The King of Dong Lin then slowly added, “When she is found, tell her that as long as she gives birth to Brother’s son, then I shall bestow her the title, Duchess of Zhen-Bei.”

His body was not like before. After Dong Lin lost their two princes, the only people eligible to inherit the throne were the Duke of Zhen-Bei and his heirs.

The Songsen Mountains continuously ran for several hundred miles. Winter withered things, but luckily pine trees were not afraid of the cold. Zuiju had been collecting pine needles to use for acupuncture for Pingting while travelling. The treatment barely allowed Pingting to summon enough energy to continue on their journey.

The two people knew their prayers to the skies were unanswered. Prayers to the earth were ineffective. They could only use their own effort to pave their way to survival. Although it was hard, they had swallowed it all back and never once said it was tiring.

Sometimes Pingting’s pulse was good, the other times bad. The gleaming white of the forest and mountains stretched on, boundless, into the horizon. The road

seemed to be growing longer day by day. The two had lost their way several times in the mountain forest. They had gone around in circles until they finally found the right direction with great difficulty.

Pingting's legs gradually grew powerless. It seemed one step was even more tiring than ten steps. She knew she couldn't last much longer but was afraid to drag behind Zuiju, so she didn't say anything.

On this particular afternoon, they finally reached a rocky area. The Songsen mountain rocky areas grew unique berries that could bear fruit even in winter. Although it wasn't delicious, it was undoubtedly good food for the two.

"Please sit down Miss. I'll go get some for us to eat." Zuiju helped Pingting to sit down. No much later, she brought a pile of red-purple berries tied with her skirt. The branches of the berries were dense and with pricks, causing a number of fresh wounds on her hand.

They had been subjected to worse suffering along the way, so Zuiju wasn't concerned at all. She placed the berries before Pingting, and the two took advantage of the rare warm sun to fill their stomachs.

"We've almost crossed the Songsen Mountains right?"

"Yeah."

"My, we're almost at the end. When your child is born in the future, we must tell him each and every of these hardships in much detail. We have to let him know that his mother had worked very hard to..." Zuiju said this while turning to peek at Pingting.

Pingting sat cross-legged and leaned back against the rock. Her face had a very faint expression on it, causing Zuiju to suddenly feel uneasy.

"Miss?" She whispered, trying to wake her. She knelt down, "Miss Bai?"

"Hm?" Pingting moved a little, her eyes slightly opened. The corners of her mouth twitched upwards. "Zuiju..."

Zuiju began to feel very nervous. "What's wrong, Miss Bai?" She hurriedly checked Pingting's pulse.

Pingting struggled free and slowly shook her head.

She beckoned Zuiju to come a little closer, until her ear was almost touching, before softly whispering, “The Songsen Mountains cuts through both Yun Chang and Bei Mo. If you go down here, you will soon reach within the Bei Mo borders. Yangfeng and Ze Yin’s secluded residence is on the other side of the Songsen Mountains. You go...”

“No!” Zuiju uttered a cry, staring back at the blank expression. “Miss, what are you saying? We go together. We’re nearly there, we’re so close. Look, I found some herbs and will boil some medicine for you. And...and I have needles, I’ve harvested some fresh pine needles. All of them are hard enough.”

“Zuiju...”

“No! No!”

Pingting was always calm and collected. This time, she seemed helplessly weak.

“Zuiju, I really can’t go on any more. If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t’ve been able to walk for a long time.” A bitter smile played on Pingting’s lips.

Zuiju stared at her, feeling a child on her back. She turned around and studied her surroundings.

The pristine patches of white seemed particularly terrifying today.

“Miss...” Zuiju’s lips were quivering. She felt a strong sense of apprehension which seemed to drown out all of her surroundings, overwhelming her.

“I can only rely on you now. Here is a map, go find Yangfeng.” Pingting lightly bit down on her lip, trying hard to pull out the map hidden in her arms. “Ze Yin is a general. He must have warriors accustomed to mountain areas. When you see him, ask him to immediately send someone to pick me up.”

Zuiju shook her head. “If you can’t walk, I can carry you. I still have energy...”

“That will only make us die together. We don’t have enough food and I’m afraid there might not be any more rocky areas ahead. You still have energy. If you go ahead by yourself, you should be able to get down in two days. Ze Yin’s men are used to fighting in the wilderness. Perhaps they will be able to find this place in a day.”

“No, it really won’t do.”

Pingting's two eyes stared, her voice a little louder. "If you carry me, you still won't be able to leave this mountain in ten days." She didn't have much energy left. She was drained. Her chest began to hurt. She raised her head, panting continuously. She stuffed the map into Zuiju's hands, "Take it!"

Zuiju took the map, her heart full of panic.

She knew Pingting had come to a dead end. If Pingting had even the slightest idea, she would never willingly stop her footsteps.

She just never thought the two would part.

"Go find Yangfeng and tell her to send the best men to find me. Coming back and forth will only take two days." Pingting looked around her, "This rocky area has places to shelter me from the wind and rain, as well as berries for food. I'll wait there."

Zuiju clutched onto the map.

All of her body's strength seemed to be concentrated at her hand. The wrinkled map seemed to be almost crushed by her.

"Understood." As if separated by a century, Zuiju finally found her shattered voice. She stared deeply at Pingting, "I will hurry to Yangfeng's and get her to tell him to send his mountaineering experts with the best gingseng. I'll do some preparations over there, so they'll be ready when you arrive."

Pingting gently gazed back at her, her pale lips curved slightly. She smiled, "Yes, that's the way." She then raised a hand and reached out for the hairpin on her head, her arm trembling for a long time. However, it kept being a little out of reach. She was unable to get it.

This left a sourness in Zuiju's heart as she saw this. She helped her get the hairpin off her head and handed it to her.

Pingting didn't take it back and said, "You take it. This is what Yangfeng gave me and should act as proof."

Zuiju answered. For a long time, there was no movement from her, only two eyes studying Pingting.

Pingting knew she was still worried and coughed once. "Zuiju."

“Hm.”

“Go.”

Zuiju answered. There was a slight sob in her voice. She slowly got up, her hand clutching onto the map and the luminous jade hairpin in the other. “Miss, I will go now.” She hesitated for a long time and finally turned to leave.

Pingting watched her with open eyes, seeing her back view slowly disappear beyond the rocky area. She sighed in relief. She then considered struggling upwards to walk around and study the terrain but couldn’t find any energy at all. She then thought about resting since she no longer had to hurry their journey. Pingting closed her eyes, her head against the rocks. Not long later, Pingting opened her eyes surprisedly after hearing the sound of footsteps on hay.

“Miss,” Zuiju had returned, her hands full of berries. “I’ll give you this.” She carefully placed the berries in front of Pingting and stood up. She looked at Pingting for some time, before softly replying, “I really shall go this time.”

“Zuiju,” Pingting saw her back view, and couldn’t help saying her name.

Zuiju hurriedly turned back towards her. “What’s wrong?”

Pingting’s clear eyes studied her for a long time, before smiling. “Nothing much, you must be careful. The sooner you get down the mountain, the sooner you can relax.”

“Hm, understood.” Zuiju nodded her head.

This time, she really went.

The imminent war had suddenly been prevented by a private conversation between the Princess of Yun Chang and Chu Beijie. All had expected to see rivers of blood flow but it was suddenly stopped. The people who thought they had miscalculated the most were the masters of the other two countries.

They were also thinking of the time when the House of Jing-An’s rise to fame, firmly grasping onto the military power as well as the King’s favour. The King of Gui Le, He Su, barely sat on the throne for a year yet immediately framed He Xia for a revolt by tricking him into the Royal Residence the day of his triumphant return.

Under such a rich scheme, the Ducal House of over hundred years of history was ruined in a single moment.

How could He Xia forget such hate?

When hearing Chu Beijie had assembled the Dong Lin army and was about to fight against the Prince Consort for a final, decisive battle to death, the King of Gui Le anticipated the event with such great joy and delight. It was too difficult to describe his excitement in words.

The army of Gui Le had been put on standby. The moment He Xia was defeated, Gui Le would immediately join the war and break through Yun Chang's checkpoints. Then, they would strike through to He Xia, the man who the King of Gui Le so bitterly detested, in one go.

Who knew that the Princess of Yun Chang would appear and completely destroy every single battle plan they had.

"It's not Princess Yaotian." The King of Gui Le got off the throne, stretching his muscles. He had already listened to army reports for half the day and finally dismissively added a few words of his own.

"King?" Le Di, an Elder Statesman, asked in surprise. "Is King saying that this report is wrong?"

"No, I'm saying that Princess Yaotian was not the one who made Chu Beijie withdraw his troops." The King of Gui Le raised his head towards the sky to sigh heavily. His expression seemed to have an unwilling loneliness in its depths. "It was Bai Pingting."

Le Di's expression slightly changed. "Bai Pingting? Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence?"

Why did he always hear that name? She was just a maid of a Ducal Residence. She could play a few songs on the guqin, yet why was she directing the overall situation today?

Even the Queen had mentioned her name in their private conversation.

"Elder Statesman must think this is unbelievable too. Chu Beijie is a hero but launched a war for a mere woman. Then again, a mere woman stopped the

battle. Now that I think about it, the fates of Yun Chang and Dong Lin, appear to rest in the hands of this one woman.”

Le Di disagreed, “King is over worrying. Women should properly stay in their homes, thinking about serving their husband and father. Chu Beijie is utterly stupid to do such things for a woman and such thinking is very misguided. He once led his troops and violated my Gui Le’s soil. Now that he is self-destructing, it is truly the greatest joy of my Gui Le.”

The King of Gui Le looked at the messenger that stood aside, not knowing what to say. The corners of his mouth suddenly rose. He may have been smiling but perhaps not. “Let me tell Elder Statesman something interesting. When Bai Pingting was taken by He Xia out of Dong Lin to Yun Chang, I sent troops to ambush them in Dong Lin, hoping to bring Bai Pingting back to Gui Le.”

“Ah?” Le Di was slightly shocked by this.

“I did not discuss this with Elder Statesman because I knew that Elder Statesman would never agree.” From the side, the King’s face revealed resolution and stubbornness in the candle light. “Frankly speaking, Elder Statesman, I have often thought about a certain question these days. Bai Pingting used to be a lowly maid in the Jing-An Ducal Residence and had been under my eye for many years. He Xia and Chu Beijie are currently fighting for her, meaning that her worth is worth a hundred times more than before. If I knew this would happen, then perhaps I should have added Bai Pingting to my harem?” The conversation quite shockingly and suddenly shifted to the harem.

Le Di’s expression changed, his heart spinning like a windmill in a breeze. His own daughter was currently the Queen of Gui Le. It was because of his darling daughter, the mother of the nation, did the Le family shoot up like the sun at noon. He had naturally succeeded the military power after the defeat of the House of Jing-An.

Le Di pondered for a long time before calmly smiling. “King must be joking. Bai Pingting is very humble in origin and has the identity of a maid. I have often heard that she doesn’t look particularly pretty either. He Xia is only going so far because of their shared history, while Chu Beijie is simply shortsighted or blinded by her.”

“Joking?” The King of Dong Lin began to faintly smile. He turned to sit down, a good half of his body leaning on a handrail of the throne. His words were warm, “Senior Statesman, you are wrong.”

“Oh?”

“Bai Pingting’s beauty is not in her looks but her mind and personality. If we are to discuss this, then all of the mothers of the four countries cannot be compared to Bai Pingting. Otherwise, how could such a hero like Chu Beijie quickly withdraw his soldiers with just one letter from Bai Pingting?” Gui Le sighed for a long time before continuing, “You and I both know that that is unlike Chu Beijie.” His smile was endlessly bitter.

Le Di didn’t know what to continue with. They heard a messenger outside report, “The Queen has arrived.”

Hearing the familiar, somewhat rustling footsteps, the door of the hall was quietly pushed open, revealing the smiling face of the Queen of Gui Le.

“Oh, Madam is here.” Le Di secretly celebrated that the troublesome topic of Bai Pingting was paused there. He hurriedly stood up from his seat.

“King.” The Queen bowed at the King of Gui Le before turning to look at Le Di. “Father is here too? Please do have a seat,” she said, her voice soft. She sat down while opening the conversation breezily. “The weather these days is too unpredictable. I’m afraid Father’s leg will reapse again. I was just planning to send someone to give this medicine to Father. Although national affairs are important, you must protect your health too.” After she spoke that much, she turned to smile at the King of Dong Lin. “Will the King stay up all night again t? Did something else happen again?”

The King of Gui Le warmly smiled back at her, shaking his head. “Yun Chang and Dong Lin are no longer having a decisive battle, what else could there be? I am just talking to the Elder Statesman about Bai Pingting.”

The Queen listened to the name “Bai Pingting” and felt her heart suddenly plummet. Her face expression however did not change. “I heard that she followed He Xia to Yun Chang. I wonder how she is now.”

“Does Queen know that Chu Beijie withdrew all his troops with just a single

letter from her?”

“Such thing happened?” The Queen took a deep breath and slowly whispered. The hall was suddenly silent.

The King of Gui Le and Le Di continued to discuss national affairs. Le Di only managed to get out of the Royal Residence when the sky began to brighten. The moment he left, he got on his horse and murmured a command. “Go to the Main General Residence, hurry!”

The driver rumbled on in the dawn to the General’s Residence. General Le Zhen and his concubine had been binge drinking the past night and had yet to sleep when he heard his father’s arrival. He hurriedly climbed out of bed.

“Why are you here, Father? What’s wrong? Just send someone to pass the message on.” Le Zhen answered the gates before seeing his father’s dark expression.

Le Di didn’t say anything. He headed straight towards the office. Once he was in the office, he looked left and right before personally closing the door. He sighed in relief and lowered his voice, “The King of Dong Lin is suspicious.”

Le Zhen said “Ah” once before hurriedly asking, “What did the King say?”

“The King kept on mentioning Bai Pingting, about how he should have added her to his harem.” Le Di stared at his son and harrumphed. “That is a warning to us that the Queen’s prized throne is not very stable.”

Le Zhen replied in disdain. “A maid can be compared to our Queen? Our Le Family has produced several generations of ranking officials and our Queen was designated as the heir’s wife by the previous king.”

“Several generations of ranking officials? The House of Jing-An is an example! Not to mention, the Bai Pingting of today is not very simple. She is related not only to the Prince Consort of Yun Chang but also the Duke of Zhen-Bei of Dong Lin. She even has reliable contacts with several of Bei Mo’s generals.”

“Father...”

“Have you dealt with the one who sent the message to He Xia?”

Le Zhen replied, “Father, rest assured. I have already arranged for him to leave

the capital as far as possible. The King will never notice him.”

“No!” The light in Le Di’s eyes dimmed. “You must get rid of the other end of the chopped root, so it will never grow back to form trouble.”

A painful expression surfaced on Le Di’s eyes. “Fei Zhaoxing is one of my rare generals. He has always been with me, very loyal...”

“Don’t say any more. Just do as I say.” Le Di replied coldly. “The King sent an ambush to He Xia, but we secretly reported the letter to him. If this news is to reach the King, it will become a treason, resulting in the complete destruction of our family. Our Le Family’s fame has only been shortlived. If the King is indeed suspicious and manages to find our tail, then what happened to the House of Jing-An will happen to us.” His voice lowered slightly, a coldness sweeping across his eyes. He gritted his teeth and muttered, “Fei Zhaoxing must die! As long as he dies, there will be no witness. Even if the King is suspicious, he cannot do anything against the Queen or to the Main General.”

Le Zhen’s expression revealed some hesitation. He thought about it for a while before finally making his heart ruthless. “I understand.”

Half of the berries that had been harvested were eaten.

The cold wind had blown all night. Pingting luckily hid herself in a rocky cave to escape the danger of being frozen. She reached a hand out from the cave. The sky was gray-white. She hoped today would be a fine day, so that the hurrying Zuiju would not come across a snowstorm until she safely reached Yangfeng’s side.

Three days weren’t long enough to say so but weren’t short enough to say so either.

Even though Pingting had made several promises to Zuiju, her heart was not empty in the slightest. The child sat quietly in her womb. She did not feel the extreme abdominal pain from the last few days. She felt particularly concerned about it even more.

My child, you’ll be fine.

She gently pressed down on her belly, hoping to feel the movement of the child inside. He was slowly growing older. On their journey, Pingting was sure she

had felt him kicking his little feet inside his mother's belly.

Zuiju said the child was still young and could not kick yet, but Pingting knew he was moving. The little life's actions were full of vitality. Every little movement made her move to tears.

"My child, please protect Aunt Zuiju and protect Mother through this obstacle." Pingting gently stroked her belly, gently whispering a few words.

She knew these dreamy like whispers were not useful, yet in her dream, this child had the same indomitable spirit like his father, both with the power to protect anyone.

Protect?

The corners of Pingting's mouth lifted into a bitter smile. There were still a few remaining berries Zuiju plucked by her hand. The smooth skin that rubbed the plump fruit inside seemed a little wrinkled. Their colours were not as good as the day before. She was temporarily dazed, her thoughts drifting to the Cloud Valley Route.

That person had gone through the dense forest, landing on top of the berries that grew in the valley.

She and Chu Beijie exchanged suspicious looks at each other.

Chu Beijie's outline had been very clear in the moonlight. It was determined, full of strength and heroism.

She had bluntly said, "I was the one who ordered to stop you from reaching our command tent. Sorry for forgetting to tell you."

Chu Beijie's tiger-like eyes had flashed with a coldness. He stared at her for a long time. He raised his head to laugh loudly and mournfully at the sky. "Geez geez, Chu Beijie, you're such an idiot!"

His laughter had pierced through to her bones.

Pingting suddenly recovered, falling back to earth. The berries in her hand had been crushed to pulp, completely dying her fist in its red juice.

Ah, the berries.

That time, she had plucked a few berries too. That person was angry. Even though he was a dignified general, when he was angry, he was more like a child. He didn't care about his own injuries, pretending to be brave. He refused to let her bandage his wounds as well as to eat her berries.

Those berries were very bitter and very hard, like these ones now.

Yet, why have they still ended up together?

That man smiled at her, kissed her on the lips.

His warm breath drilled into her heart and lungs as if declaring to the world several times that Bai Pingting belonged to Chu Beijie.

He said, "I'll wait for you in Dong Lin."

He smiled, truly believing the future would be both simple and happy.

And then?

And then what?

It seemed that God did not allow them to be together, by creating all sorts of controversies. Pingting's rolling tears began to drip onto her clothes. Only then did she realise her cheeks were full of tears.

No, don't think about him any more. It will not end well. No matter how true or hard work put in until bleeding, nothing good would come out of it.

Don't think any more, don't re-injure my heart again.

Pingting tried hard to expel the warmth out of her heart. One night of rest had finally given her back some energy. She leaned against the wall, using it as support to help her stand. She planned to gather some more fresh berries. After taking two steps, she felt a sharp jolt of pain in her lower abdomen that then rippled through her body like a red hot knife stabbing into it.

"Ah!"

Pingting screamed, clutching onto her belly as she fell towards the ground.

Cold sweat began to surge out.

Child, my dear child, what's wrong?

Do you hate how bitter the berries are?

Do you hate how cold it is?

Your father is not here, so Mother will protect you.

“Ah! Ah!” Bursts of immense pain in Pingting’s lower abdomen sent her rolling to the ground. Bean-sized sweat drops began to ooze out of her forehead as her ten fingers helplessly grabbed at nothing or clawed the yellow mud leaving long scratches.

“Beijie, Beijie...” She widened her eyes, looking at the gray skies pressing closer and closer above her head. “Chu Beijie, where are you?”

Why are you not by my side?

If you appear before me right now, I swear to the skies that I will always always stay by your side and play qin and sing for you. As long as you hold my hands and say, “Pingting, I’ve found you”, then I will forget everything. I will forget the war-torn skies and forget the heartless moon on the sixth.

I will pick up each of the shattered pieces of my heart on the ground, as long as you appear right now.

I really want to see you. I want to see you.

Didn’t you say you love me?

Didn’t you say you would hurry back? I racked my brains so that I could wait for the moon of the sixth to rise, yet I never saw your figure returning home.

I want to see you, just one gaze or even your shadow.

You know, there is no word that can express my despair.

You said the we swore to the moon, to never turn against each other. Can we never turn on backs against each other?

Can we really never turn against each other?

“I hate you..”

The gray sky in Pingting’s eyes gradually became black as she felt the pain almost tear through her body. She dimly heard her voice cry out, hoarse and exhausted, “I hate you! I hate you!”

“I hate you! I hate you....”

She had used all of her energy in her cries, until she plunged into the deep darkness. She only vaguely realised that to hate someone, rather than forget them, was much easier.

Translation Notes:

- “hunched over”: The subject or official would bend over usually when speaking to royalty. It’s like a bow that shows modesty.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 48

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch48

Apart from Gui Le, there was still another army eyeing the armies of Yun Chang and Dong Lin.

After Ze Yin had resigned, retiring to a secluded residence, Ruohan succeeded the position of Bei Mo's Main General. He had accompanied Ze Yin for many years through civil wars and military exploits as well as the necessary characteristics, so his promotion was expected by all.

Ruohan led the Bei Mo army, waiting not far away from Yun Chang's borders. Bei Mo was almost destroyed by Chu Beijie in the last battle, so all of Bei Mo's generals viewed him as a grim reaper. If they could slip between the gaps between Yun Chang and Dong Lin, adding their own two cents in killing Chu Beijie, then naturally it would give great benefits to Bei Mo.

However...

"The battle has ended."

"Not ended, more like they didn't start at all."

"What's going on?"

Inside the advisory tent, Ruohan settled the army reports in his hands down onto the table. He then held his hands behind his back as he raised his head to look at the round ceiling of the tent.

"Main General?"

"Bai Pingting..." Ruohan seemed to be trying to remember it all, returning to Kanbu City back then. "Miss Bai, what on earth did you write in your letter to stop a battle? Ruohan has no idea whether to feel disappointment or admiration

towards you.” A wry smile appeared on his face.

Even now, he could still deeply remember that qin sound. The Kanbu city walls had been crumbling, a devastating condition, when Chu Beijie appeared with several thousands of elite soldiers outside the city. Then, at that very moment, he heard the most melodious music.

Bai Pingting positioned herself on a high palanquin. Her long sleeves directed the wind, flying lightly.

She saved Kanbu, saved Bei Mo. Or it could also be said that Ruohan promotion as Main General was all thanks to the plans she had set out in those days.

Yet, where was the woman who caused all of Bei Mo’s generals to willingly lower their heads today?

“Main General, the army of Dong Lin has already withdrawn. What shall we do?”

“The deciding war has not started, therefore the core of the Dong Lin army is not hurt. We mustn’t be stupid to take the initiative in attacking. Since this opportunity is no more, get all divisions to withdraw too.” Ruohan resolutely ordered, “Pass on this Order, rest tonight and return early morning tomorrow.”

The various generals returned their positions. Sen Rong, the Commander of the Right Wing, was the last to leave and he stopped at the door of the tent. He thought for a while before walking back to ask, “General, is there any news about Miss Bai?”

“I heard that she has left Yun Chang. Her whereabouts are unknown.” Ruohan sighed.

Sen Rong frowned. “She is hated by the King of Dong Lin for murdering his sons. Yun Chang’s He Xia wants to imprison her, and it seems that she can’t return to Gui Le either. General, do you think she’ll...”

“I think so too.” Ruohan nodded. “When we leave tomorrow, you can choose thirty of your most competent subordinates to stay and to patrol near the borders. If they can meet her, then we’ve at least helped a little.”

Sen Rong quickly nodded at this. “Yes, I was thinking that too. Sigh, it leaves quite a bitter taste in my mouth, but that’s all we can do.” He looked at Ruohan before opening his mouth again. The words were however got in his throat, and he couldn’t pull them back out again. In the end, he refrained.

Ruohan could see he had stopped his words. There were only the two of them in the tent. They were brothers who had fought for many years together on the battlefield. There was no way one didn’t understand what the other was thinking. He lowered his voice, “You don’t need to say any more, I totally understand. Ever since General Ze Yin left, the King’s thoughts has become more and more unpredictable. No one would’ve thought that the King would ally with He Xia to form an army of three hundred thousand to pressure Dong Lin’s borders, forcing the King of Dong Lin to hand over Miss Bai. It seemed that the bad deed did not get punished. Even if people despised the idea, the King’s Order is not to be breached. Sen Rong, I have led troops for many years, but I had never felt so guilty when leading them until that moment.”

The two had thought the same. Sen Rong heavily stomped once, replying in a gruff voice, “Don’t say any more. This really ruins the mood. If General Ze Yin was still around, he would’ve definitely convinced the King to not ally with that bastard He Xia. If only...sigh...” He sighed loudly as he lifted the door flap and strode away.

Ruohan was left in the room, thinking about many things.

Although the decisive battle between Yun Chang and Dong Lin did not start, the situation of the four countries had become much more subtle. Everyone was gathering their strength in the darkness, waiting for the storm that would suddenly break the current silence. It seemed the real battle between the four countries would break out within three years. Was Bei Mo’s military power enough to withstand the catastrophe at that time?

He slowly paced up and down in the tent, deciding what clearly needed to be changed in the army. He turned to sit down, spreaded out some paper and began to write a report to the King of Bei Mo.

After an army report of several hundreds of words, Ruohan blew the ink on it that had yet to dry. Thinking that he had to summon the messenger to take the

letter on a fast horse back to the capital, he raised his head and suddenly began to shake.

There was a blurry figure in front of him. He had no idea how long it had been standing before him, quietly.

“I’ll make a bet with General. Before General can call for help, I will have already sliced General’s throat.”

The man wore black. From the black mask on his face, only a pair of piercing eyes were revealed. His right hand was pressing down on his sword. The sword had yet to come out of its scabbard, yet it already exuded a murderous intent.

Ruohan had experienced hundreds of battles and a great many were near-death experiences. However, as his calm and collected expression touched this man, it completely froze.

So imposing, so brave, who was this man?

“So what if you kill me, there is no chance of you leaving alive anyway.” Ruohan stared into those eyes, lowering his voice.

The intruder laughed. “Then let me make another bet with General. After killing you, not only can I get out as freely as I did coming in, I can even leisurely get rid of a few generals of Bei Mo. Yun Chang and Dong Lin’s battle didn’t happen in the end, so all the soldiers are relaxed thinking they will not be involved in the war. You ordered all troops to return tomorrow morning. It is currently late at night, so all the soldiers are taking this opportunity to get some rest of course. All are likely to be sleeping soundly.”

Although this wasn’t in a battle and the guards would indeed be more relaxed, this man had silently sneaked into the heart of the army camp without raising any alarms. His skill was beyond measure.

Ruohan stared at him.

The skin on his hand revealed a tan from the sun, while the tanned skin appeared solid like steel that had been smelted. A master had then elaborately carved into it, so that it could not be broken with just a hit.

Ruohan stared at him for a long time before softly gasping, “Chu Beijie?”

“As expected of Ze Yin, at least you can guess quite a bit.” Chu Beijie chuckled, taking off the cloth mask. His handsome, angular face popped out.

This was the first time Ruohan had been so close or clearly see the greatest enemy of Bei Mo.

No wonder he was so imposing and courageous. No wonder he had entered the Bei Mo army camp like a game. This man was Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei after all, the world famous Chu Beijie.

And the man that Bai Pingting deeply loved.

“The reason why the Duke of Zhen-Bei snuck into this army camp is to kill me?”

“I don’t want to take your life right now.” Chu Beijie answered, “I have come here because I want you to pass on a message to the King of Bei Mo.”

“What message?”

“He dared to send troops to study my Dong Lin’s army, thinking that he could add his own two cents. He must bear the consequences.” Chu Beijie lowered his head as he studied the precious sword in his hands. “My hands are very itchy since the battle against Yun Chang never began. From now on, I will kill all of Bei Mo’s generals, one by one starting from the highest ranking general, until the King of Bei Mo no longer has any generals available. That way he can watch how his troops slowly disintegrate over time. Isn’t that very interesting?”

Ruohan was surprised for a moment before he sneered back, “In other words, the Duke of Zhen-Bei is still here to be an assassin.” He thought his death was imminent, but was not afraid of it. He suddenly stood up, unsheathing his sword. He shouted, “My Bei Mo’s army camp will not allow you to leave as freely as you came. Even if I am to give up my life today, I must kill you for the King. Someone come!” He shouted and waited for a bit, but no one rushed in.

Ruohan was surprised again.

Chu Beijie disdainly replied, “If you want to shout, you should do better than that. All of your personal guards have had their heads looped off, and the nearest tent is five feet away. It’s all thanks to the irrational rules in your Bei Mo army, saying that the advisory tent had to have some distance away from the rest of the army tents.

Ruohan's heart slightly froze at this. All of the guards outside the tent were close confidants, all talented in their own way yet had been quietly eliminated by Chu Beijie. Taking advantage of the rising anger, he screamed, "Someone come! There's an assassin!" He raised his own sword and dashed forwards to attack.

Chu Beijie coldly observed the enemy thrusting his sword towards him. His pupils shrank slightly as his sword was finally pulled out of its scabbard. The cold flash began to wave, followed by the clashing sound of the two swords colliding into the other. Ruohan felt a wave of great power as he sliced into the air. His shoulders stiffened, and he abruptly came back to his senses to see the figure of Chu Beijie flashing in the candlelight had disappeared. Ruohan was secretly alarmed by this and quickly swung left and right. He took two steps back before suddenly feeling an immense pain. He cried out miserably once, a cut already on his waist.

Ruohan endured the immense pain and brought his sword up to stab again but his hand happened to be brought towards Chu Beijie. Chu Beijie tapped on it before slamming it at Ruohan's sore wound, causing his sword to clatter to the ground. It knocked over the candle stand which rolled twice on the ground. All of the candles went out, plunging the advisory tent into silent darkness.

Ruohan could only see black, yet he felt a chill on his neck. He knew that Chu Beijie had already placed his precious sword on his neck.

This man, in three moves, killed Ze Yin's best subordinate, Mengchu, in Kanbu back then. As expected of his fame, he was indeed a skilled man.

Ruohan knew he had come to a dead end, but he refused to beg for mercy. He heard faint, frantic footsteps outside and clenched his teeth. "You can kill me if you want, but you will definitely not be able to escape."

Chu Beijie remained very confident and sneered, "Of course if I want to kill. I start from the Main General, but as I said before, I don't want to take your life right now. When you see your King, make sure to remember to tell him not to mess with my Dong Lin."

Ruohan had yet to open his mouth before he felt a throb in his head and fainted.

The Songsen Mountains were covered by ice and snow. When the sun shone

on the snow, a red light was reflected. A petite figure stepped through the snow some deep, some shallow as she hurried on her way.

The snow was very deep, sometimes to her knee. Every step taken resulted in a lot of energy spent.

Zuiju's breathing was heavy. The light that reflected in the snow dazzled her eyes. Her eyes began to darken. She struggled to see the road ahead.

Sometimes, she couldn't help but lean against a tree to catch her breath, but when she did stop, her heart began to be harshly clawed by guilt.

Pingting was exhausted and waiting for her at the rocky area.

Pingting and the child in her belly were waiting for her.

Pingting was struggling, and Zuiju knew this best. She was a doctor, so there was no way she didn't know about Pingting's situation. However, there was no chance of survival if the two journeyed together. Pingting was right. Going ahead alone to see Yangfeng and getting help soon after was their only chance of survival.

Dear God, why must it be like this?

In one shot, plum blossoms at the secluded residence that yet to open, its fragrance yet to float in the wind and in the next, became a dead end.

Why did the most intelligent woman who loved the most heroic man had to have such a fate?

The luminous jade hairpin Yangfeng gave to Pingting was securely pinned in Zuiju's hair. That hairpin seemingly weighed a ton, pressing down on Zuiju like how Pingting and her child's lives did.

She took out the map and studied it carefully.

"Lost again?" Zuiju worriedly frowned. The white Songsen Mountains had often caused disorientation to the people on it. She knew she was very close to Yangfeng's place, as she had desperately hurried onwards without rest.

Her destination was one of the mountains near Bei Mo on the Songsen Mountains.

It was nearby, it had to be nearby.

“Kyaa!” Her foot slipped and Zuiju fell on the snow once more.

It doesn't matter, I've already fallen several hundred, several thousand times already. Teacher, Teacher, I bet you didn't think that little Zuiju would be so brave one day.

The air is very cold, but my heart has a fire that is almost burning me whole.

She gritted her teeth and climbed out of the snow. She suddenly jumped back in alarm as she saw a man's figure pop into her eyes. She had been journeying through the Songsen Mountains for the longest time but never see anyone except for Pingting.

A man.

The man was dressed in mountaineering clothing. His hands were lightly clutching to a crossbow and seemingly blocked Zuiju from proceeding.

Zuiju looked at his cold expression and began to feel wary.

She slowly straightened.

Fanlu silently assessed her before finally raising the corners of his lips to spit out three syllables. “Bai Pingting?”

“Who are you?”

“So you're Bai Pingting.” His gaze rested on Zuiju's hair as he praised, “Such a exquisite hairpin.”

Zuiju began to tremble and felt a foreboding feeling hitting at her heart.

She stared at Fanlu, slowly stepping backwards.

Fanlu's crossbow rose slowly. The sharp arrow tip gleamed in the forest as it pointed towards her chest.

Zuiju felt she had died at that very moment. Her body went cold and every hair trembled. The hairpin above was much too heavy and drilled her into the ground.

No, I mustn't die.

She thought of Pingting.

The Pingting who had leisurely read a book on a couch, the Pingting who had played qin in the snow and the Pingting who had plucked plum blossoms. She remembered the Pingting that had slumped to the ground as the moon passed half the sky, crying in utter pain and desolation.

I mustn't die here. Zuiju fiercely glared at Fanlu. She had no energy left to fight back, not to mention Fanlu held a lightweight crossbow, but she fiercely glared at him anyway.

Fanlu was almost confused by her eyes. He never knew that a woman could face death without fear.

As he hesitated, Zuiju madly turned around to run.

No, I mustn't die!

She borrowed strength from the skies, causing her to crazily escape to the forests.

Whoosh.

The slight sound of wind breaking came into her ear as an arrow whisked slightly passed her face, lodging itself into a tree beside her. Zuiju was shocked and her footsteps became even more chaotic.

Whoosh, whoosh...

The slight sound of wind breaking came near her ear again. One after the other, the arrows flew into the trees and bushes. Zuiju dodged them one by one in panic.

Dear God, are you trying to help me?

Please help me to the end. Please let me see Yangfeng and let her know Miss Bai is waiting for her help.

And her child, the blood and flesh of the Duke, one of the Dong Lin Royal House.

She was desperate to escape. All she could see was white. Her foot had stepped into the nothingness.

“Ah!” Zuiju cried out in panic, involuntarily falling through the air.

She fell heavily into a pile of deep snow. Her right leg happened to hit a protruding rock.

Jolt!

A terrible pain began to come up her legs. It was so painful, it almost shut off the rest of her body.

“Ah...” Zuiju groaned, barely propping her upper body to sit up. She hoped to have a proper look at her leg.

It was definitely broken. Her entire body shook from the pain from the bone.

What to do? She still had to hurry and pass on the message. She definitely could not stop here. Herbs, as long as some herbs were boiled, then enduring it was fine.

Yet where were the herbs?

She turned around, searching her surroundings as well as she could. It was completely white with dead trees and a few rocks that came out of the snow, but what else?

She looked at the east and hesitated, as if unable to believe what she saw. She hurriedly raised her hands to rub her eyes.

“Ah, it’s there!” Zuiju felt a mixture of surprise and pain. Her eyes began to feel moist.

I see it, I see it! The mountain where Yangfeng’s secluded residence lies is finally before my eyes. I have reached the foot of the mountain and reached to this place.

Zuiju can finally burst into tears of joy, for it has been found. Miss Bai, we’re saved.

“Miss Bai, wait for me. I can already see it.”

The pain jolted as Zuiju tried to climb up. She was almost half up when she suddenly felt no support and helplessly fell back onto the earth.

“It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter.” She quietly told herself. “I can climb over there. I can climb up the mountain.”

A light flashed in her eyes, like a pearl flashing in the deep sea. After the longest and most refined gestation period, it was finally ready to shine.

Zuiju dragged her body forwards through the snow. Why was the way there was still so far? She gritted her teeth to no end as she struggled forwards. She felt she was near the end of the world, yet the vast whiteness remained before her.

Her bright red blood whirled on the snow, leaving a gorgeous panting.

She heard footsteps approach from afar. She raised her head. The claws of despair raked into her until it coldly strangled her heart.

Fanlu was standing somewhere above, observing her coldly.

No, No...

Zuiju angrily glared back at him.

I am already here, you can take away our final thread to survival so easily.

Just one step away, only one step.

Fanlu's hands did not move. His right hand held the crossbow, while his left held an arrow. He had already retrieved every single arrow he had shot earlier. Twenty seven altogether, none missing.

Zuiju stared at him and stared at his arrows.

No, I mustn't die.

Pingting is still waiting for me in the snow and wind. There is a limit of three days, for both her and her child.

Chu Beijie had broken the promise of the sixth, ruining her happiness. I can't make another mistake and ruin her life.

The snowy ground and the mountains were cold and heartless. It brought a strong feeling of death, enough to saturate one's heart, but it did very little to hide its ability to give heartbreaking despair.

Zuiju raised her head, shouting in grief. "Yangfeng! Yangfeng! Are you there? Help me!"

"Yangfeng! Man General's wife, Yangfeng, can you hear me?"

“Anyone is fine, Chu Beijie, Duke of Zhen-Bei, He Xia, please save Bai Pingting! Have all of you forgotten Bai Pingting?”

“Chu Beijie, you coward, have you forgotten Bai Pingting?”

She is your wife, with your flesh and blood. She is not supposed to go to the end of the world, nor be buried in the Songsen Mountains.

“How could you not appear? How could you...” Zuiju helpless cried on, “Do you still remember Bai Pingting? Do you still remember the words you said? How could you forget...”

The echos bounced through the forest, yet a miracle did not occur.

It was unfair, very unfair.

She raised her head, her face stained with tears when she saw a smile in Fanlu’s lips.

“Can you smell the scent of snow?” Pingting had asked her this, on their very first meeting.

She had accompanied her Teacher to attend all sorts of rich families and the Royal House, seen many different people and incidents, yet she had never seen such deep love before.

Bai Pingting and the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

It was superior love, yet it was so mournful, so desolate, so heartbreaking.

Dear heavens, you are far too heartless.

Why do you not pity such deep love?

The small little Zuiju is willing to pay her life, yet still cannot change this into a happy ending.

“Yangfeng! Yangfeng! Hurry and come out! I beg you to come out!”

The mountain continued to echo back the cries of Zuiju. Fanlu quietly sat above, watching her unsatisfied struggle.

He did not raise his crossbow, because there was no need.

Zuiju shouted until her voice was hoarse, as if a fire had engulfed her throat.

Once she had ran out of energy to cry, she quietened. The scent of snow began to float into her nose and with it, the metallic smell of blood.

Blood that gurgled out of her leg.

Zuiju seemed to notice something. She propped up her upper body with great effort, nervously looking in all directions.

In the falling night, she saw flickering green lights that had quietly crept from the forests.

Wolves!

She finally understood what the coldness in Fanlu's smile meant.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 49

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch49

“Main General?! Main General! Wake up!”

Ruohan felt a splitting headache as he opened his eyes. The advisory tent was brightly lit with candles. He saw several faces of concerned generals above his head.

Where was Chu Bejie?

Ruohan clutched to his head as he forcefully sat up. “Where is he? Has he been caught?”

Everyone looked at each other. Sen Rong was pushed by everyone towards the front. His voice was a little muffled, “We heard General’s call and rushed into the advisory tent. It was pitch-black everywhere and because we had no idea whether General was alive or not, it was chaotic as we panicked. When the candles were lit, we searched around but could not find the assassin’s traces.”

Ruohan sighed once and slapped his leg. “Damn it, such a pity!” But then he remembered that Chu Bejie would not be caught so easily. He should have already thought of how to leave before entering the camp.

Huacan was a newly promoted general. He lowered his voice to report, “Fifteen of Main General’s guards were killed. It appears to be a surprise attack, and they were killed by a single cut at the throat. This assassin’s skill is truly terrifying.”

The bodies of the guards had been personally checked by each general. Each of them thought the skill of the enemy was incredible, causing an expression of fear on everyone.

Sen Rong shook his head. "The four countries has never heard of such a terrifying assassin. Perhaps it's time to tidy our Dong Lin's army camp. What would've happened if something happened to Main General and the army lost its advisor?"

"Yeah. Who on earth was the assassin?"

Ruohan was silent for a long time, before he replied, "Chu Beijie."

Although the tent was huge, it was suddenly silent. All the generals exchanged looks amongst each other, not knowing what to say.

Finally reacting, Sen Rong took a deep breath before opening his mouth wide to say, "He was actually the Duke of Zhen-Bei?"

The name Chu Beijie, to them, was like a nightmare.

In Kanbu, Chu Beijie had almost destroyed their country. This person had controlled the enemy's strategies and his resourcefulness was shocking. His swordsmanship was even more chilling

This time, by sneaking into an armed enemy camp, he once again showed his courage and superior abilities.

Who could not get a headache from having such an enemy?

"What on earth did he come here to do?"

"I'm not sure." Ruohan's expression was extremely twisted. "He wanted me to pass on a message to the King." He then recounted what had happened. Although it was very humiliating to be knocked out so easily, military affairs could not be treated lightly, so Ruohan still revealed everything honestly.

Everyone understand that the intruder was Chu Beijie. They did not doubt the words from Ruohan's mouth in the slightest. When they heard that Chu Beijie had declare to kill all of Bei Mo's generals, one by one, all of them were so angry that their eyes became red. They loudly cursed him.

Ruohan then said, "Chu Beijie's words are perhaps not without ground. If our army camp's security remains so lax, then we won't be able to withstand highly skilled people like him in the future."

When he said this, everyone went silent.

The Bei Mo army camp was far less strictly organised or trained compared to the Dong Lin army. Everyone knew that clearly.

An army that Chu Beijie had tuned could only perhaps be evenly matched against He Xia.

Ruohan looked outside the tent. The sky had yet to brighten. There was only a whisp of orange light faintly shining through the gray clouds.

“Our departure will not change. We set off tomorrow, so you may all leave. Let me think in peace for a while.” As the people left, Ruohan called to Sen Rong, “Stay here.”

Sen Rong nodded and sat down, thinking. He frowned, “Main General, there is one thing that I don’t get at all, no matter how much I think. Chu Beijie threatened to kill my Bei Mo’s generals and successfully infiltrated, but why did he only want Main General to pass on a message rather than begin his killing spree?”

Ruohan replied, “I also think this matter is strange. Judging from his face, he holds great faith in his skills in battle and is extremely arrogant. He immediately threatened that he wanted to kill all of Bei Mo’s generals, one by one starting from the highest ranking general, until Bei Mo no longer has any generals available.”

“But, Main General is already the highest ranking general in Bei Mo. If Chu Beijie really wanted to do that, he wouldn’t let go of Main General.”

Ruohan’s expression suddenly changed and he abruptly stood up from his chair. “Damn it, I know!”

Sen Rong was surprised. “What does Main General know?”

Ruohan’s expression was solemn and his voice sunk. He slowly replied, “Main General, Main General Ze Yin.”

This time it was Sen Rong’s turn to pale. “That’s right, he definitely wants to kill Main General Ze Yin first!”

Ze Yin was the pillar of the Bei Mo army. Even though he had retired to live in a secluded residence, his prestige in the army had not changed, the Bei Mo

equivalent of Chu Beijie in the Dong Lin army.

If the news of Ze Yin's assassination by Chu Beijie was to spread through the world, then the morale of the Bei Mo army would collapse and become extremely vulnerable.

Sen Rong was also a seasoned general who accompanied Ze Yin for many years. He couldn't help feel worried about Ze Yin. He rubbed his hands anxiously, asking, "What to do? We can't just sit back and watch a matter concerning Main General's life and death unfold."

"Main General is my Bei Mo's famous swordsmanship practitioner and has loyal guards by his side. I'm just afraid that Chu Beijie may somehow slip through the gaps and happen to succeed."

"We must immediately contact Main General, so that he is warned of Chu Beijie." Sen Rong suddenly remembered something and he was distressed. "No one knows where the Main General went to live in seclusion after resigning. We must immediately send people out to find Main General, to report this news. Chu Beijie holds all of Dong Lin's military power and has many spies. We mustn't let him find Main General before we do."

Ruohan was confident and he smiled, "No need to worry, I know. I'll write a letter now. Main General is a hero himself, so as long as he makes enough preparations, he will absolutely not let Chu Beijie succeed."

When early dawn fell, a fast horse rushed out from the Bei Mo army camp, heading towards the Songsen Mountains.

Chu Beijie, who had been waiting for a long time on the grass of another hill saw the small back of the messenger moving rapidly in the distance. He gently got up by using the beloved horse by his side. "Time to hit the road. We'll go find your female owner."

He turned to mount up, calmly tugging the reins in his hands.

The horse neighed, released its four legs to pound the yellow dust below, chasing after the messenger soldier.

Judging by the direction the soldier was heading to, as expected, Ze Yin and Yangfeng's secluded residence was somewhere in the vast Songsen Mountains.

Pingting, you have often mentioned your good friend, Yangfeng, to me.

If her secluded residence is near Yun Chang, then you will definitely go to find her, right?

Have you already seen Yangfeng? Or are you still on the way?

Chu Beijie is incompetent. I breached several Yun Chang checkpoints, yet couldn't get your whereabouts at all. Although the sword in my hand is sharp, I cannot force out your whereabouts from the sky, in all these seas of snow.

Pingting, please stop your footsteps and don't drift around any more. Don't forget your good friend, Yangfeng. Go and see her.

I will wait for you there, catch you, hug you, kiss you and apologise to you. I beg you to forgive me – for the feelings that had spread like clear water, lingered like fragrance in the air. I look forward to our love that can be as firm as a mountain.

I already understand what is the greatest power, the end of the world and what is—to never turn against each other.

Yun Chang capital was full of singing and joy throughout the night. Multicoloured fireworks ascended to the sky with a bang, illuminating the delight on all of the peasant's faces in the capital.

The Princess and the Prince Consort returned.

The luxurious carriage had all of its curtains raised. Yaotian revealed a happy smile and was nestled in He Xia's arms. This touching and comforting scene was deeply imprinted in the hearts of the citizens.

Following behind the two were the thousands of Yun Chang soldiers, safely returned to their home. They had departed with certain death on the battlefield, but the skies had mercy on them. There was no test of war in the end.

What waited for them were cheers and a sky full of dazzling fireworks.

And finally, good alcohol.

"This cup is dedicated to Senior Official."

The colourful dance maids crossed the main hall as the hundred, somewhat

drunk, officials laughed carefreely. He Xia's laughter was rich as he gulped down cup after cup of the endless cups the officials dedicated to him. He then took the jar of alcohol himself and stepped towards Gui Changqing who had been sitting at one side, smiling all along.

Gui Changqing was a bit stunned by this, hurriedly lifting his own cup. "I dare not, this cup is still dedicated to Prince Consort. Prince Consort led the troops on such a faraway expedition. It must've been tough."

He Xia drank quite a lot, his handsome cheeks slightly flushed. His dark eyes had no trace of tipsiness, however, as he said, "Senior Official is too modest. Leading troops to war is simply manual labour. Senior Official is the one who truly worked the hardest, handling affairs from the capital."

Gui Changqing had never been one to drink, but the moment the threat of war had been eliminated, it was such great news that even people who didn't like to drink had to celebrate with a couple of drinks. He collected his pride together and raised his cup, "Fine, a cup to the Prince Consort. I also wish my Princess Yaotian will be blessed with longevity, hm, as well as heirs soon."

He Xia laughed at this, "Such an honest wish, thank you Senior Official!" He raised his head to drain the cup in a single gulp.

"Prince Consort."

"Luyi?" He Xia turned around and saw Yaotian's personal maid. He looked around at the various noisily celebrating officials, bustling with activity, before taking her to one side and lowering his voice, "Did the Princess summon me?"

Luyi shook her head, biting onto her lower lip as she smiled. "No. The Princess told me to tell Prince Consort that she had been subject to a long bumpy ride and is very tired. She took a bath before going to sleep and would like Prince Consort to see her tomorrow. The Princess also said to be careful of your own body and not to drink too much alcohol. Prince Consort has also travelled for a long time and too much alcohol can easily damage your health."

He Xia broke into a laugh. "I was worried that I wouldn't be able to last the alcohol here. Now that the Princess has given her Order, then it's perfect timing to send them all back home to sleep."

He immediately then used Yaotian's words to break up the officials that still wanted to celebrate and left the Royal Residence first, to go to the Prince Consort Residence.

The Prince Consort Residence long had its entrance wide open, with many servants waiting outside. Dongzhuo was leading them and had his neck strained. He saw a figure swaying in the distance before hearing the sound of hooves. Several people then stepped forwards.

"Welcome back, Prince Consort!"

"Welcome back, Prince Consort!"

The horse stopped and Dongzhuo immediately went forwards to take the reins. He raised his head, "Master, you're back."

"Yeah." He Xia answered once before dismounting. Just when he was about to walk through the door, he saw the several maids that had stepped forwards to welcome him back. His eyebrows creased slightly, "Why are there so many people in the doorway? You can all go."

Dongzhuo took the reins and threw it at a manservant waiting aside. He dismissed the other servants and followed his Master.

He Xia's strides were large and did not have any hint of stopping. Dongzhuo hurried behind him. He Xia headed straight for the rear courtyard and turned two or three corners before reaching the room where Pingting had lived in. He suddenly stopped, stood outside the door, and for the longest time remained frozen.

Dongzhuo quietly watched him stare at Pingting's door, as if like a statue of wood. From what he saw, he just felt desolation.

He had thought He Xia was heartless back then and so when Yaotian had revolted, he had turned a blind eye and let Pingting go. However, seeing He Xia today, he realised that he truly felt miserable.

Dongzhuo felt guilty as well as sad. He couldn't help but walk towards him and softly calling, "Master."

He Xia returned to his senses when he heard his call. He absentmindedly

looked at him before slowly walking towards the door, raising his hands to push lightly on the door.

Squeak...

A slight sound was produced from the rotating door shafts. The room's furnishings entered his eye little by little.

The flowers on the window sill had already withered, and the bed had been cleaned properly, the mantle pulled to the side. There was a pair of embroidered shoes placed underneath the bed. On the dressing table, a bronze mirror stood and beside it, the gilded box that he had specifically ordered to be made for Pingting stood quietly. The qin was still there. It sat silently on the table, yet already had a thin layer of dust.

He Xia strode into the room, his footsteps were very light, as if afraid to break something. He sat on the icy-cold chair, placing his precious sword from his waist down onto the table.

He had used that very sword to sword dance.

Here, he was in this Prince Consort Residence.

His sword gently came out of his scabbard like a dragon entering water, smoothly gliding in, shedding its dirty half which floated on the water like a quilt.

Pingting was there. She remained seated at the pavilion, silently watching.

Her eyes were like watery smoke and her fingertips played the piece "Nine Days." The moment the qin sound began, he almost thought that everything had not changed.

He almost thought that the days had not passed, the seasons had not changed and death was non-existent.

He had been wrong.

In the depths of He Xia's eyes, there was a cold light flashing. He was wrong, the days had passed and overturning the seasons did not exist.

Schemes and ability was not powerful enough.

He had painstakingly used all of his energy to protect this beautiful illusion of

the past, yet just a single light-hearted Order from the Princess wiped it all away.

Yaotian, his wife, the master of Yun Chang.

He Xia was deeply jolted awake by facing the room that had lost Pingting and the Prince Consort Residence that had lost its warmth.

As long as Yaotian existed, he would always be the Prince Consort.

A Prince Consort that was unable to keep his own maid.

“Master, this guqin...shall I pack it away?”

“No need.” He Xia gazed at the dusty guqin and the corners of his lips quivered slightly. “Leave it, so it can wait for Pingting to come back.”

Pingting will definitely return, return to my side.

I refuse to let anyone steal my things and will never allow anyone to tarnish the House of Jing-An again.

I will not let the Royal House of Dong Lin and Gui Changqing, that damn old geezer, to bind my hands and feet.

I will not let my ambition be succumbed under Yaotian’s tenderness or the throne.

No one is allowed to treat me like that.

Chu Beijie was now at the foot of the Songsen Mountains on his horse, after trailing behind the messenger. He looked up to see the majestic mountains seeming more mysteriously beautiful covered in white snow than usual.

Yangfeng was in these mountains.

Pingting should also be in these mountains.

Perhaps she was playing qin, or maybe reading, or softly singing about heroes and beautiful woman. As Chu Beijie gazed at the solemn mountains, he couldn’t stop his heart from fluttering everywhere.

He was very eager to see Pingting indeed.

He longed to see her. The longing in his dreams was not enough to describe the howling longing he felt overall. It was insufficient to restrain his anxiety.

The messenger had been strictly ordered by Ruohan and was very careful to hurry on his way. He kept on looking back constantly to see if he was being tailed, but no matter how capable he was, there was no way he could detect such an expert at tailing like Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie watched him from faraway until reaching the mountain where Ze Yin's secluded residence was located. He rode his horse up the mountain and finally saw dozens of wooden cabins hidden in the forest.

Chu Beijie began to dash forwards, but had yet to reach the cabins when several burly men suddenly jumped out from the side of the road. They shouted, "Stop! Do you know what this place is and still dare to loiter around?" Their swords were in their hands, cold light flashing. All of them were fairly skilled.

These threats were a trifling matter to Chu Beijie and he didn't care at all. Chu Beijie didn't defend or flee, he just sat on his horse as he looked around. He lowered his voice, "Tell Ze Yin that Chu Beijie has arrived."

"Chu Beijie?"

"Dong Lin's Chu Beijie?"

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei?"

"That's me." A determined smile escaped from Chu Beijie's lips. "I am here to pick up my Duchess—Bai Pingting."

The man with a heart as cold as ice who had led the Dong Lin army to battle in all directions, killing everyone, was now before their eyes?

Some people's hands shook so much that their swords almost fell to the ground.

"What are you being dazed for? Hurry and pass on the message." Chu Beijie got off the horse and sneezed once before stepping forwards.

Everyone was shocked by this and took several steps back, looking alert. This famous general had almost ruined their Main General, Ze Yin, in the battle of Kanbu, almost leading to the destruction of the entire Bei Mo.

A coward sobbed once before turning to report. The remaining people stayed on the spot, terrified, surrounding Chu Beijie with their spears. Everyone was

staring at the precious sword at his waist.

Rumours had that whenever the sword of the Duke of Zhen-Bei came out of its scabbard, rivers of blood were sure to flow.

Chu Beijie sat on his horse. He seemed to be like a general that had fallen from the skies, although he was fiercely glared at, his expression remained leisurely. A faint hint of joy was present on his face.

Pingting, I have already arrived.

What are you doing?

Are you playing with Yangfeng?

You said before that Yangfeng played very fine too. Perhaps you'll let Chu Beijie watch the match from the sidelines? Let me sit by your side, watch your slender fingers, pick up the black and white stones before lightly placing them onto the board. Such scene would certainly be pleasing and I will never tire of it.

The man who had ran to pass on the message quickly returned. His expression was very strange. He did not dare stand too close to Chu Beijie as he submissively replied, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, our Main General would like to see you."

Chu Beijie nodded, pleased. He followed the manservant who lead the way to the front gates. The gates were silent and without people. He did not see Yangfeng, nor did he see Ze Yin.

He was brave in nature and had never been afraid of the Dong Lin Royal Residence or palace guards or blood when young. Of course, he was not afraid of such a log cabin either.

When he got off the horse, he placed his hand on the hilt of his sword as he headed straight inside.

When he stepped into the room, he was stunned. His eyes were filled with a pure white when he entered. Apart from the white walls, in the huge guest room, there was absolutely nothing at all except a huge coffin placed in the middle.

The room Chu Beijie had stepped in was actually mourning room.

There was a man with a very solemn expression standing in the room. His

eyebrows were thick and dark, and his eyes were breathtakingly piercing. “The Duke of Zhen-Bei?”

Chu Beijie calmly raised his eyes to meet his. “The Main General of Bei Mo?”

He suddenly heard a high pitched woman’s voice. “Chu Beijie! Where is Chu Beijie?”

Chu Beijie knew Pingting’s voice by heart. He guessed the female’s voice was from the Main General’s wife. He raised his voice, “I am here.”

His words had yet to fall when the curtain to the side room was lifted. A petite figure rushed into the room. Yangfeng’s face was very pale and then, as if crazy, went to stab at Chu Beijie’s chest.

Although her arrival was sudden, there was no way she could hurt Chu Beijie. The sword had yet to reach his chest when Chu Beijie reached out and grabbed onto Yangfeng’s hand.

Ze Yin hadn’t expected that Yangfeng would rush out with a sword from the side room. It was too late by the time he realised and his expression darkened. “How dare you hurt my wife?” He jumped up to pounce.

Chu Beijie had stopped Yangfeng in one go and had, after remembering she was a good friend of Pingting, not dared to do anything at all. His fingertips pressed lightly on her slender wrist before gently pushing her. Yangfeng was no longer stable and began to fall backwards.

Ze Yin happened to be in the right place and caught her. He knew that Chu Beijie was powerful and feared that Yangfeng had been injured. He hurriedly asked, “Are you hurt?”

Yangfeng shook her head. Her hair was very messy and her eyes were very red. There was not a slight trace of her usual relaxed appearance. She suddenly swivelled round to glare at Chu Beijie before suddenly breaking into tears. She grabbed on Zuiju’s sleeves, pleading, “Kill him for me! Hurry and kill him!”

From what Chu Beijie heard from Pingting, Yangfeng was always warm and polite. He had not expected that his first impression of her was a crazy woman. His heart began to feel doubtful as his gaze swept around the room, resting on the coffin. He was secretly alarmed and his heart was for once, frightened. He

whispered, “Where is Pingting?”

Yangfeng seemed to not be able to hear his words. She just thumped Ze Yin’s chest as she cried, “Husband, kill him for me! He was the one who killed Pingting! He killed Pingting!”

Chu Beijie felt as if lightning splintered through his head. He took two abrupt steps forward. He shouted, “What did you say? What did you just say?”

This shout was like the roar of the tiger, and it seemed to make Yangfeng come back to her senses. She stopped hitting Ze Yin who was trying to comfort her and absentmindedly turned to stare at Chu Beijie. It seemed that blood wanted to flood out from her red eyes as she spat out, “You killed Pingting. You hated her and sent her off to He Xia, so that she died a lonely death in the snow.” Every word was squeezed through her clenched teeth. Her voice was ghastly cold, as if coming from the depths of a ghost town.

Chu Beijie took a step back and turned to look at the coffin in the room. He forced out a smile, “Impossible, that’s impossible. You’re lying to me because you feel bad for Pingting, so you’re scheming against me.” Even though he said this, it was babbling done through cold sweat. He felt as if he was falling onto ice.

Yangfeng was a very good friend of Pingting, and the two had grown up together. Chu Beijie had met many people, and naturally knew that Yangfeng’s pain was definitely not a lie. He felt a chill that he had never once experienced in his lifetime invade into him. It broke through his skin and cut straight into his bones.

“You’re lying. Pingting is here, hiding.” Chu Beijie laughed, his expression twisted. His eyes flickered and stopped on Ze Yin who was hugging onto Yangfeng.

His hand pressed down on his sword, as if he would cut Ze Yin’s body into numerous pieces if he just said one unfavourable phrase.

Ze Yin didn’t say anything, however, he simply held his bitterly crying wife. He returned Chu Beijie’s gaze.

Chu Beijie’s gaze, apart from determination, honesty, persistence and a little

fear, there was also a little pleading bit of hope.

Then in the depths of his eyes, stirring like a storm, it gradually became contaminated with incredible despair.

He could, from his former enemy Ze Yin's face, see the tiniest trace of sympathy.

"Impossible, that's impossible..." Chu Beijie felt like his heart had been stabbed by a sharpened knife. He howled once, took several steps back and raised his head to the sky to cry out, "Pingting, Pingting! Hurry up and come out! I've come, Chu Beijie has come!"

"I've come to apologise to you! You can punish me any way you like! Pingting, come out!"

The hurt beast's howls shook the mountain forest, causing the gathered snow on the trees to fall off. The entire Songsen Mountains quietly stood as it listened to the bitterly upset shouts of Chu Beijie.

How could this be? How was this possible?

Those dexterous fingers, that unrivaled smile, that intoxicating fragrance and the willowy figure, how could all of it be gone?

He had clearly heard her, the sound of her qin and singing about heroes and beautiful woman surviving the turmoil. She had sung about the rises and falls of monarchs as well as soldiers knowing the resultant fraud. She had passionately sung about longing and how it was a joy to merely look.

She was undoubtedly here, in the snow, fog, clouds and snow. Her smile was ever so elegant and demure. Her black eyes quietly watched him, as if containing endless thoughts that were placed upon himself.

Where? Where was Pingting?

Chu Beijie numbly turned away, looking at that lonely coffin.

"She had already arrived at the foot of the mountain, but met up with wolves. She only had..." Ze Yin lowered his voice, "only had the final bit left to go."

Yangfeng had gradually calmed down. She stared at Chu Beijie with her very bloodshot eyes, and desolately mourned, "She was here to find me, I knew she

would. She was wearing the luminous jade hairpin I gave her. She climbed through the Songsen Mountains, coming from so faraway to see me. Why did I not send someone down the mountain quicker? Why? Why..." She buried her head in Ze Yin's shoulders, her own trembling uncontrollably.

Chu Beijie dazedly looked at the coffin, completely losing his soul.

As he approached that coffin, every step seemed to be done on clouds. It felt soft, didn't feel real at all.

Everything was like a dream. The coffin seemed to be nearby, yet suddenly it seemed so far away. The short path drained all of his body's energy, and he struggled onwards, barely finishing.

He finally touched the coffin and chilling coldness gushed out from it. It spreaded from his fingers to his heart, causing this world-famous Duke of Zhen-Bei to shiver.

"Pingting, you're in here..." His voice was at its gentlest as it addressed the dark, black coffin.

He wanted to open the box, planning to hug his beloved wife, his Duchess, his Bai Pingting.

But when his ten fingers grasped onto the lid, the always brave Duke of Zhen-Bei could not summon any energy at all. Chu Beijie's hardened hand from holding swords shook. He tried very hard, but he could not stop shaking for even just one moment.

"She came across wolves. only leaving her clothes, and..." Ze Yin's fist was tightly clenched as he whispered, "and a few bones."

Each word weighed as much as a ton, crushing onto Chu Beijie's heart. His knees could never support his body. He slumped heavily into the ground.

The coffin was both cold and hard. Chu Beijie carefully stroked it.

Pingting was not like that. She was petite, exquisite and in the snow, two red clouds appear on her cheeks. She liked to watch the stars in the night sky and was like a cat, often seeking out his warm broad chest, coming and going freely.

"Pingting..." He stretched out his two arms, doing his best to embrace.

He had come too late, far too late.

He should have hurried back by the sixth and wrapped his arms tightly around the waiting Pingting. He should have hugged her, not letting anything hurt her and push all danger far away from her. He should have let her smile, leisurely read a book in the warm winter sun, take a nap and give her complete freedom so she could carefreely look after their child.

“Marry me.”

“Why?”

“Not only you can play qin and sing well, but you also have nimble hands and own a heart of gold. I’d much rather choose you over many other women.”

“I...”

“Let’s swear to the moon, never turn against each other.”

Never turn against each other?

Where did that never turn against each other go?

“If you live, I live. If you die, I can only accompany you to death.”

Her every smile and frown seemed to be in the air, in the fragrance of flowers.

Always, omnipresent.

“Is Duke going to war?”

“Duke doesn’t need to explain to Pingting. Pingting is no longer concerned about anything apart from Duke now.”

“Pingting passed her birthday alone, so as for Duke’s birthday, could we be together?”

He hadn’t made it and turned against her.

Let her heart break as she boarded on the carriage in the harsh light of sharp swords.

Let her drift to Yun Chang, with his flesh and blood, crossing through the snowy mountains, suffering endlessly.

Let her be surrounded by wolves which tore piece by piece of her flesh and

snapped her bones.

“No!” Chu Beijie howled in pain. After that, he resolutely unsheathed his sword.

The precious sword of the Duke of Zhen-Bei that had shook the skies was thrown hard onto the ground. The sword fell with a sonorous crash, causing an instant spark. Chu Beijie slowly turned his head, looking at Yangfeng, “It was I who ruined her, go ahead and kill me.” He didn’t say any more as he raised his head and closed his eyes.

Yangfeng was silent for a long time. She wriggled free of Ze Yin’s embrace and picked up the precious sword from the ground. The precious sword was very heavy, and she could only hold onto it with both hands. Even though she held it with both, the sword still trembled.

The sword pointed at Chu Beijie’s throat and with just one light slice, this world-famous general that every country wanted to get rid of, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, would disappear from this world.

Pitter.

Patter...

The mourning hall was deathly silent, except for Yangfeng’s teardrops. Each was large and dropped endlessly onto the ground.

She hated this man just earlier and wouldn’t have minded dying on her way to killing him. However, now that his sword was against his throat, she was actually trembling.

Pingting, Pingting, this Chu Beijie who made you cry in sorrow and broke your heart is now under my sword.

Has he perhaps ever made you smile in happiness before?

“The world is vast, where do you plan to go?”

“I’m going home.”

“Going home?”

“There’s someone waiting for me.” Pingting had smiled faintly, a gentleness

and longing in her eyes. She had lifted her hand and touched the hair that had been swept messily by the wind.

Yangfeng clearly remembered Pingting standing by the window. The direction she had gazed was towards Dong Lin, where the Duke of Zhen-Bei was located.

Her hands tightly clasped around the sword shook, and the interlocked fingers gradually loosened. The sword fell to the ground with a “clang” beside Yangfeng’s feet.

Chu Beijie opened his eyes in surprise.

Yangfeng returned his gaze coldly. “I won’t let you go disturb Pingting in the heavens. She doesn’t want to see you.” Her expression was faraway as she reached out to stroke the coffin. Her voice was caring, “Pingting, I know you’re exhausted. From now on, no one will ever hurt you again.”

Chu Beijie stared at the coffin, his heart like ashes.

Inside there lay his most beloved woman, his Duchess and his child’s mother. In this lifetime, he never properly faced Pingting.

Indeed, he was the one who killed her.

Pingting would never forgive him whether it was on earth or in the heavens.

If he died, his begs for forgiveness would be hated, and if he lived, he would be hated for asking her remains.

The unrivalled beauty that he devoted himself to had been ruined in his own hands.

“You’re right...” Chu Beijie’s eyes were empty holes, clay-like, as he slowly rose up from the ground. “You’re right...” He watched the coffin longingly, but no longer had the courage to touch it with his trembling hands.

What right did he have to touch it?

Chu Beijie turned. His eyes could no longer see anything, no Yangfeng, no Ze Yin, and no path.

He forgot his precious sword, forgot everything as he walked out the gates. His gaze was fixed ahead as he walked towards the depths of the mountain forest.

His horse, eating hay outside, neighed once before trotting behind Chu Beijie. It didn't understand why his master entered the cabin and return as if his soul had been lost.

Ze Yin's men watched the man and horse leave and lowered their voices, "Main General, this man is the greatest enemy of my Bei Mo. Shall we perhaps take this opportunity and..."

Ze Yin watched Chu Beijie's back view and shook his head, sighing, "He is no longer anyone's enemy."

The famous Duke of Zhen-Bei had already died.

His heart was already dead.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 50

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch50

The Bei Mo army had started its journey home.

On the way there, Ruohan received a letter from Ze Yin, passed by the returning messenger.

His fired up battle heart sank at the previously unknown news.

The thin letter in his hands seemed to be very heavy. He sighed as he looked at Sen Rong. “Miss Bai has died.” The man who was now the highest ranking general had a layer of frost on his face.

Gone, that remarkably graceful female advisor was gone.

She had died in the cold Songsen Mountains, her remaining bones had been scattered to all directions by wolves. There was only a luminous jade hairpin left behind, gleaming in the snow.

Who knew that strange woman who organised troops in Kanbu and freely interefered with the Dong Lin army would have such a fate?

Sen Rong hesitated for a long time before lowering his voice to ask, “Is this true?”

It was unbelievable, utterly unbelievable.

Bai Pingting, she had once used one song to make several hundreds of thousands retreat away from the Kanbu walls.

Just one song.

“The Main General’s wife has also fallen ill.” Ruohan hesitated before bitterly

smiling, “We were all wrong.”

Sen Rong was puzzled.

Ruohan explained, “It was because Chu Beijie didn’t know the exact location of Main General Ze Yin’s secluded residence, so he intruded into the army camp, saying lies to threaten us. He followed our messenger to find Main General Ze Yin.”

Sen Rong’s expression changed, “Doesn’t that mean...”

“He didn’t go to kill anyone but to find someone. He was looking for his Duchess, Bai Pingting.”

“Risking his life to enter the army camp was not for national affairs but for love?” Sen Rong was frozen for a long time before he spat out a long breath. “So Chu Beijie attacked Yun Chang for Miss Bai, not simply an excuse, but a true desire.”

Ruohan nodded. “Correct. Now that Miss Bai has given her life to the Songsen Mountains, it seems that Chu Beijie’s ambition has been ruined. Although my Bei Mo has a deep hatred for him, he is still a truly rare hero in this world.”

It was a pity and regrettable.

One was a hero, the other was a beauty.

It was a joke from the gods.

The two generals had both accompanied Pingting during the battle of Kanbu and deeply acknowledged her. After a silence, Sen Rong lowered his voice to say, “No matter what others think, I have to find a place to pray for Bai Pingting tonight. I must get the general in charge of food supplies to prepare some good alcohol and food. Also, I’d like to have the remaining pots of high-quality alcohol in the barracks. Main General, I know that military drinks are not to have alcohol, but could we please drink freely under the moonlight?”

“Why not?” Ruohan mournfully sighed. “Tonight, all of the generals that had participated in the battle of Kanbu shall drink through our pain for the loss of Miss Bai.”

How could they not drink, drink to forget their pain?

Why could this world not accomodate a person like Bai Pingting?

Why was the sky so gray and dark, so much that it was ominous? Or perhaps when one's eyes were blindfolded and unable will reality be seen?

She had once been like snow, its fragrance had spilled into their nostrils, cleaning their lungs.

She had once been wrapped in colourful clothing as she swirled around on the stage inside the Ducal Residence. She had sung a cappella as she gazed back to look at a crowd of familiar faces. They had stayed behind due to her voice, stopped their footsteps, transfixed while they listened.

Then, it all dispersed.

When? Why? Great sorrow began to heavily press forwards, for unclear reasons. It seemed that there was no reason at all, but a sad destiny that had been the karma of intelligence.

"Miss? Miss?" The voice was faraway.

Pingting opened her eyes, light began to pour into her eyes. They focused on a slightly familiar figure. For a moment, she could not remember where she was.

Where was she? She looked around, looking at her surroundings. Her entire body felt it had been beaten. Even moving a single hair would send her whole body into thundering pain.

"Hm..." Pingting slowly breathed out, waiting for the pain to subside.

Where is my child?

That's right, my child! She suddenly woke up, widening her eyes. Her hands were pressed on her lower abdomen and she could gently touch the tiny little movements.

"Dong't worry, we have already fed you with some medicine. You and the child in your belly are all fine," said a face above hers, laughing cheerfully.

Pingting's suspended heart was put to rest as she looked up at the ceiling. It seemed to have been a long time since she had seen a ceiling. She spent so many days between rocks in the snow and felt that she would never see a ceiling again.

How nice, she had finally been rescued.

“Where is Zuiju? Yangfeng?” Pingting studied her surroundings.

“Who is Zuiju? Yangfeng?” A puzzled expression appeared on the square face before her. Not long later, he grinned and laughed again, “Oh, I know, you’re talking about our Main General’s wife. Geez Miss, you still haven’t found the Main General’s wife? It’s been so long that even the horse have had their foals, yet you still haven’t found them?”

He must be mistaken. Pingting puzzledly looked at that smile when suddenly, she remembered everything. She said, “You’re that tall guy I met on the road to Petal College. You’re A-Han.”

“Hah, Miss remembers me now? That’s me! A-Han! You gave me your horse and even left me money to marry a good wife.” A-Han chuckled heartily. “Tell you what, I’m married now and expecting a little A-Han soon.”

His hearty laughter shook the roof, causing the dust to fly off.

Pingting laughed as well before curiously asking, “Do you not know Zuiju? How did you know I was in the mountains?”

“Just luck. I went up on the mountains to catch some prey to strengthen my wife’s body. A gray rabbit was pierced by my arrow yet ran around non-stop before disappearing into a rocky area. I went into look and geez, I saw no gray rabbit but a Miss who was nearly frozen to death.” A-Han recounted the story with great vigour and joy.

“You saved me?”

“Of course, of course!” A-Han gestured, “I carried you down the snowy mountains, as well as my bow and the rabbit. Luckily, I have quite a bit of strength. You were really nearly frozen to death and only seemed slightly better after drinking heaps of wild rabbit soup. Heh, wild rabbit soup indeed strengthens the body. I also asked other people to bring some medicine that are good for fetuses and fed it to you. It was originally for my wife though.”

Hearing his words, Pingting felt uneasy but immensely grateful.

“Sorry for causing so much trouble.”

“Don’t worry, my wife is very tough whether it be her skin or bones. The little A-Han she has inside is strong too, so I’m not afraid.”

A-Han was proudly saying this when a woman wearing a bulky coat walked into the room. Her belly was protruding widely as she laughed, asking, “A-Han, are you talking to yourself again?”

“Hey, hey, Wife, the Miss is up!” He beckoned the woman over, smugly introducing them to Pingting. “This is my wife.” He then pointed at her belly, gleefully saying, “This is little A-Han.”

A-Han’s wife shared her husband’s enthusiasm. She smiled as he pinched his cheeks, “We’ve run out of firewood, go cut some more.” She then turned to Pingting, “You’re finally up, Miss. How could you climb the mountains in such cold weather? The Songsen Mountains stand no nonsense. Even men are afraid to go in winter. A-Han is an idiot, how dare he lie to me to go hunt a wild rabbit there.”

She then rattled on about a bunch of other things. Perhaps it was because they had saved someone that she appeared to be very happy. She warmly looked at Pingting, “With just another chicken, your cheeks will recover the redness soon.”

Yet Pingting was thinking something else.

Had the deadline of three days already passed?

What if the reinforcements had arrived but were unable to find her traces, meaning that Yangfeng and Zuiju would be worried to death?

But, the skies were still merciful and had allowed her and the child to survive.

Dear child, your life is blessed indeed.

Pingting gently stroked her lower abdomen. There was a bump, both soft and hard at the same time. She felt an indescribable sense of fulfilment inside her, the feeling of life.

“A-Han’s Wife, I...”

“Are you hungry? I’ll bring some food over.”

“No, no,” Pingting shook her head. A-Han’s wife was indeed a very good match

to A-Han, for she was as attentive to care as he was, “I want to hurry on my journey.”

A-Han’s wife widened her eyes. “Hurry on your journey? Where do you want to go like that? No, no, I’m still planning to prepare a chicken for you tomorrow.”

“I have to go.” Pingting lifted herself from the bed with her palms. “I must find Yangfeng and your Main General Ze Yin.”

A-Han was chopping firewood outside and had strained his ears to hear the movement inside. At this moment, his head popped into the window view, as he shouted, “The Main General has gone to live in seclusion. Miss, you won’t be able to find him. I heard that even the King cannot find him.”

“No, I know where he is. I must hurry over. If they can’t find me, they will definitely worry.”

Yangfeng and Zuiju would definitely be very worried.

Midwinter was about to pass. Under the shining sun, icy water followed the small ridges, slowly trickling.

Perhaps the snow on the Songsen Mountains would melt the same way?

He Xia took out Yun Chang’s Flag of Command, accompanied by his soldiers. In the morning assembly, under the gazes of the hundred officials, he solemnly returned the Flag with both hands. The war had ended and the rights to mobilise the army had been returned to Princess Yaotian.

Gui Changqing watched the Flag of Command in He Xia’s hands amongst the crowd. He secretly sighed in relief when he saw that it had returned to the Princess’ hands.

Yaotian’s feelings towards He Xia were deep and if it hadn’t been for the Senior Official’s warning over and over again, she would have never sent an Order to take back the Flag.

“Is Prince Consort angry?”

The morning assembly had finished, and Yaotian studied the returned Flag of Command. Her heart was still a little perturbed. She hurriedly asked Luyi to bring He Xia over. Her heart was only settled a little when she saw her husband directly

walking towards her.

He Xia was surprised, “Why would He Xia be angry?”

“Yaotian took back the Flag of Command.”

He Xia hesitated for the slightest moment before cracking up into laughter. He looked helplessly and pityingly at Yaotian before shaking his head. “Why would Princess think that? We are husband and wife. Even if I am jealous of everyone in the world, I will never be jealous of my own wife.” He then took a seat beside Yaotian and held her hand. His expression suddenly became mysterious. He lowered his voice, “The Senior Official wished that Princess would soon have heirs. When will I have Princess’ Order, so I may help achieve this?”

Yaotian also leaned forward. She had thought his whispering was because he had something important to say. She had been listening very carefully, only to realise this person was teasing her again. Her cheeks flushed red, and she tilted her head to one side, frowning. She scowled back, “It was just morning assembly, but Prince Consort is not being serious again. If the Senior Official knew, he’d scowl at you for a long time.”

“Princess’ words are not quite right.” He Xia’s face was very solemn as he straightened his spine and coughed twice, “Parenthood is one of the most important milestones in life. How could this not be serious, as even the Senior Official has mentioned it a number of times? No matter whether Princess gives an Order or not, I will definitely help.”

Yaotian’s heart was sugary as if eating a lot of honey. Her face was very red as she replied, “Who else, apart from Prince Consort, could possibly help me anyway?” Her voice was high and soft as a mosquito, almost no one could hear it.

“Heh, then I shall wait for Princess’ arrival at the Prince Consort Residence tonight.” He Xia was happy and forgot the royal etiquette, planting a fierce kiss on Yaotian’s face. He stood up, “I will now go to deal with military affairs. Princess, don’t forget our promise tonight.”

Yaotian watched him stride away, his posture even more like a dragon. Her lips could no longer conceal her proud smile.

Luyi, who happened to be bringing in lotus syrup, came in and saw Yaotian's expression. She giggled, "As I said before there's no need to bring the lotus syrup in so soon. Princess has just seen the Prince Consort and is completely sweetened. What need is there for external sweetness?"

"Luyi, are you seriously brave enough to make a joke out of me?" Yaotian recovered her spirits and sat dignified. She scolded, "You must have learned that off the Prince Consort." However, she could not uphold her pose and began to laugh again.

That night, Yaotian arrived at the Prince Consort Residence. She got off her horse but did not see He Xia come out. Dongzhuo hurriedly came forward to greet her. "Princess, the Prince Consort has sent me to pass on a message. He has been dealing with national affairs today and will return a some time later. Dinner has been prepared. As the Prince Consort has instructed, they are all dishes that Princess likes to eat. Would you like to eat in the side room of the backyard?"

Hearing that He Xia had not yet returned, Yaotian couldn't help feel a little dismayed. She simply nodded, saying, "I'll leave it to you."

"Then I'll instruct them to take the dishes in the side room of the backyard."

As expected, the dishes were delicious. Yaotian often came to the Prince Consort Residence, so its chefs naturally knew what she liked. They spent a lot of effort in their dishes. The taste was even finer than the Royal Residence's.

However, He Xia was not there and Yaotian had no appetite. She idly moved her chopsticks a few times, raising her head several times to look at the sky as well as ordering Luyi to check things out.

Luyi replied, "I have already sent several people to ask around, even without Princess' order. Although the war is over, there is still things like pensions and rewards, so he remains busy."

Yaotian faintly sighed.

Waiting for a full half hour, Luyi who constantly looked outside finally shouted, "The Prince Consort has returned!"

Yaotian was delighted by this and stood up to gaze outside the window. As

expected, she saw the familiar figure valiantly hurrying towards her way. He Xia wiped his sweat the moment he entered the room, smiling while he asked, “Has Princess had dinner yet?”

“Yes, has Prince Consort eaten yet?”

“No time to eat.” He Xia handed the white towel he used to wipe sweat off back to the servants before sitting by the table. Yaotian hurriedly ordered the maids to bring over some warm rice and dishes. She personally handed over a pair of chopsticks. He Xia received it and beamed at her. While picking up the food, he explained, “I wanted to return earlier, but if I don’t finish today’s work, then tomorrow will be even worse. Sorry for making Princess wait; it’s all my fault.”

“Since military affairs are so busy, then why don’t I transfer two officials so some of Prince Consort’s load can be shared.”

He Xia hurriedly swallowed two gulps of food. He shook his head, “Although we’re suffering because there’s only a few people working on it, adding two more will bring in additional problems, making us even busier.” Seeing Yaotian’s confused look, he patiently explained, “Sorting out pensions, rewards and ranking systems are not difficult, but the challenge is that money and grains must be deployed. I don’t have any allocation of money or grain specifically as rewards for soldiers, so I must ask for every reward from the national treasury. For every reward, a huge number of officials have to give their approval, as well as huge number of letters to be written. I can wait, but can the soldiers in the army wait? I wasted more than half the day at the national treasury, yet they only approved enough money for five thousand soldiers. I have to go back tomorrow to bargain with them too.”

Yaotian had been listening very carefully, her hands holding a pair of chopsticks. She helped He Xia pick up bits of food, while slowly saying, “This is no simple matter. If rewards and pensions are lagging behind, the soldiers will be very unhappy. How could it not shake the army’s morale?”

He Xia was clearly tired. One bowl of rice quickly entered his stomach. He beckoned a maid to serve up another. He agreed, “Princess is right. I don’t particularly care about this right now, at most it will just make me tired.

However, if the army's rewards and pensions lag behind too much, and battle were to suddenly begin, then how would we possibly counter them promptly? Though this time against the Dong Lin army has made us much more familiar with the topography, perhaps we don't need as much time to prepare counters."

He Xia had always been a famous general. Yaotian had dabbled in the government for a while now, so she knew he was right. She did not hesitate and immediately said, "The army indeed needs to have its own treasury and granary. I will see to an Order in tomorrow's morning assembly so that a new one can be built, all of them under Prince Consort. Only by having money and grain can troops be controlled properly."

He Xia chuckled as he advised, "Princess shouldn't so hurriedly give an order. This should be discussed with Senior Official first. If the Senior Official doesn't know in advance, then we'll both get scolded."

"Rest assured, Prince Consort. To things that benefit Yun Chang, Senior Official won't disagree."

After this serious discussion, He Xia finished eating. He comfortably stretched out before squinting at Yaotian. He laughed evilly, "Now that national affairs are all over, it's time to discuss the things between husband and wife. Whatever sweet words Princess would like to hear, please give an Order."

Yaotian mocked him, "Now where did the serious Prince Consort go to? There's no way I would give an Order; you already have far too many sweet words, so much it's hard to eat."

He Xia readily replied, "Fine, then I will never say them again. Princess, don't be hurt by it. Hm, let me think, since I can't say such nice words, then what shall I get to make my beloved wife happy?"

Yaotian saw his brooding look in the flickering candlelight. His eyebrows reached into his temples, and his looks were extraordinary as a delightful evil. Only her confidants, no outsiders, were nearby so she no longer cared about the reserved etiquette of a master of a country. She smiled, her fingertips poking his shoulder, and giggled, "Prince Consort, quit pretending. Judging by your expression, I know you've hidden something nice so I wouldn't know. Hurry up and pass it up, or be aware of my punishment."

He Xia saw her reveal a girly expression and grabbed her wrist. He used his strength, causing Yaotian to shout “Kyaa” as she was helplessly pulled towards him. He Xia held her by the waist, letting her sit on his lap. He stroked her cheeks, “Is the dance pretty?”

“What dance?”

He Xia’s shiny obsidian eyes studied Yaotian. He suddenly lowered his head, gently nibbling on Yaotian’s necks, earning another “Kyaa”. Before she could speak up and criticise him, He Xia teased, “Princess is delighting me again. The Prince Consort Residence recently welcomed a group of Bei Mo dance maids, and each were very pretty. Did no one report such an important matter to Princess? I’m sure there are waves of sourness rolling in someone’s stomach... Ow, that hurts...”

Yaotian had fiercely pinched He Xia. She wriggled free of his grasp, twisting her head to say, “Prince Consort is wrong. I am not a woman who feels unjustified jealousy.”

He Xia stroked his arm that had been pinched. “Why, if it wasn’t jealousy, did you pinch so hard?” He came forwards again, whispering in Yaotian’s ear, “Report to Princess, I’ve been so busy with work that I didn’t even see those dance maids. Why not take advantage of tonight and ask them to dance, while we drink to celebrate. That way, you won’t endure your jealousy alone.”

When Yaotian heard he hadn’t seen those women, the joy in her heart was uncontrollable. She turned around, “How interesting. I also want to see how different Bei Mo dancers are.” She then massaged He Xia’s arm, her face flushed as she asked, “Does it really hurt?”

Perhaps it would’ve been better if she hadn’t asked. The moment she did, He Xia immediately creased his eyebrows, forming a bitter expression. “It hurts, it hurts even more than a wound from swords.”

Yaotian couldn’t help punch him playfully. She softly scorned, “What famous general, so famous that fills the earth below the skies? Why do I always see a wicked person?”

“You’re not my soldier, so why must I be so serious?” He Xia ceased causing trouble and freely laughed, his voice full of pride.

The servants brought the dancers of Bei Mo forwards. They were to dance on a small stone platform in the rear courtyard, while the couple drank and had fun on the pavilion.

That night, the skies decided to be pretty too. The moon hung in the sky, gray and bright, as it shone on the never-melting snow.

The dance maids were all wearing the dance dresses of Bei Mo. They were vividly coloured and had a drum attached to their waist which their dexterous hands hit. Yaotian had never seen such freshness and was very fascinated by them.

He Xia had been depleted of his energy through the day, yet he seemed even better than Yaotian. After the dance had finished, he loudly applauded, praising, "This song was danced well. In dedication to this dance, we must drink three cups."

Yaotian also drank, reflecting him. She brought the cup to her mouth before shaking her head, "Prince Consort, my alcohol tolerance is not as good as yours. Rather than three, just one will do."

He Xia was delighted with his own drinking but didn't force her to do the same. He nodded, "Do as you wish, Princess. However, this dance is much too graceful and deeply clutches a person's soul, therefore I must have three cups to add to the fun."

He consecutively drank two cups before unsheathing his sword.

"Dance of the skies, dream of the vast emptiness, affection is not strong..." His voice was clear and bright, surprisingly very pleasant to the ear.

Yaotian had often listened to He Xia's sweet talk, yet she never knew that he sung so decently. Surprise leaked into her eyes.

However He Xia stopped just after one phrase, refusing to continue. He stopped his sword, turned his head, laughing. "The waist-drum dance just now was very nice to look at. Are there any more dances that uses those drums? Choose another song and dance on."

Without their notice, the moon passed half the sky, and the alcohol was soon depleted. Most of it had entered He Xia's stomach. Although he had good

alcohol tolerance, he was still a little tipsy at that moment.

Yaotian was afraid that drinking too much would harm his health. She softly advised, "Although the dance is good, we have already had enough fun. Shall we go back to rest in the room?"

He Xia had no intention of putting down his cup, but he always obeyed every little thing Yaotian said so he immediately put it down. "True, it's time to rest. Princess is tired too."

He stood up, dismissing the maids and other manservants. He carried Yaotian, entering the room together.

The two had caused trouble for most of the night, and the servants were very sleepy. Finally seeing their two masters about to sleep, they secretly cheered in their hearts. The Bei Mo maids were even more delighted. They waited for He Xia and Yaotian enter the room, watching the lights go one by one before packing up. Not long later, the backyard bustling a moment ago immediately became deserted.

Only the moon did not change. It remained round and big as it hung in the sky like before.

The cool air of the residence was flowing slowly.

Dongzhuo had been exhausted by the day too. His eyes closed, deep in sleep on his bed. For some reason, he was suddenly jolted awake. His eyes flickered towards the sky outside and saw the moon was still in the sky, suggesting that he hadn't slept for long.

He couldn't help think of Pingting.

Pingting really liked to admire the moon not only the moon but also the stars. He wondered where she was.

Thinking that much, his drowsiness was completely gone. Dongzhuo struggled to climb out of his bed and went out of his room. A gust of cold wind happened to greet him, causing him to wildly shiver twice.

It seemed that the wind was bringing something.

Dongzhuo thought it was strange. He stepped forwards and strained his ears.

Yes, there was a sound. He began to walk, ending up at the backyard. The sound of metal cutting the wind was much louder. When he raised his head, he couldn't help being stunned.

The moon hung in the sky, causing a cold gleam on the metal of the sword.

In the deserted backyard, there was an agile silhouette on the snow.

"Master..." Dongzuo softly said.

He Xia didn't seem to know there was someone around him. His eyes flashed, his sword going everywhere, leaving a bright white trail.

Dongzuo saw He Xia skillfully swinging his sword, ripping the air in the yard. It seemed that he was venting out all of the heaven and earth's grievances. Dongzuo didn't dare open his mouth to bother him, just quietly stood there.

No one could bother He Xia right now.

His sword was in his hand.

The famous general, the Marquess of Jing-An and the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, currently had his sword in his hand.

Under the bright moon, his waving sword became a dance.

It seemed his whole life was reflected in that cold gleam of the sword.

Each turn was carefully maneuvered, with the energy of a dragon, with swordsmanship of a hero and majesty of the mountains.

After the entire set of Jing-An sword techniques had been danced, He Xia's forehead was already soaked in warm sweat. His single layer was stuck to his body as he sheathed his sword. He then turned towards Dongzuo with no trace of expression on his face. His voice was light, "Bei Mo has brought the news. Pingting is gone." He then took the sword, heading to the room where Yaotian was. He lightly pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The door then shut quietly.

Dongzuo stood in the wind, shocked.

The courtyard was cool.

It was simply still, and the sleeping people remained in their dreamland.

The sound of drums began to sound from afar, making the silence seem even more silent than it was.

Pingting.

That Sister Pingting, who had such an endearing smile and liked to watch the moon, is gone.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 51

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch51

“Nice death, long overdue.” Incense filled the air. In the smoke, the Queen of Gui Le had a trace of a sneer as she leisurely replied, “That servant is quite skillful to have poisoned the two princes of Dong Lin and to seduce Chu Beijie. Forget her long friendship with the Marquis of Jing-An, who knew that even the generals of Bei Mo would mourn for her. Hmph, are all the people under the skies crazy?”

“Madam is right.” Le Di stroked his beautifully trimmed beard. “Bai Pingting is indeed nothing, but when Chu Beijie learned of her death, he was deeply hurt. He is now devastated, which is deeply important to the current situation of the four countries.”

“Devastated?” The Queen was stunned for a moment. Her gaze became a little sad. She couldn’t help sigh, “There really seems to be a true hearted man in this world, yet why is it that Bai girl who gets him? If our King had half of the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s heart, then I would be dearly blessed.”

“Madam, don’t pity Chu Beijie yet. There is still something that needs to be done first.”

“What?”

Le Di pushed open the window, looking left and right before closing it again. He stepped until he was in front of the Queen and lowered his voice, “Madam, do you still remember Fei Zhaoxing?”

The Queen thought for a while, until she remembered. “Isn’t he one of Brother’s subordinates? That time when the King sent people to hide in Dong Lin so they could ambush He Xia and Bai Pingting’s carriages, we sent him to He Xia

so...”

“Yes.”

“What’s wrong, hasn’t this person been disposed yet?”

“If he was disposed already, then what need is there to feel worried? Having mentioned this, it’s all thanks to your brother who doesn’t live up to expectations.” Le Die sighed, saying, “Your brother’s heart is not hard enough. He simply thought that if they grew up together through childhood, then he would be considered a confidant. He did not find someone to kill him when he came back, only asking someone to give him money so he could hide somewhere far away.”

The Queen’s expression changed, “How could Brother be so muddled? How could he have pity about such a thing? Sigh, even if Brother isn’t thoughtful enough, Father should at least teach Brother a lesson.”

This matter was both important and not. However if it were to blow out of proportion, then it was a national treason that would result in the destruction of their family.

Le Di clenched his eyebrows. “How could I not teach him a lesson? You Brother listened to me and immediately sent someone to find Fei Zhaoxing. However, who knew he was that clever and left no trace behind.”

The Queen secretly thought that both her father and brother were incompetent, but she herself had no choice on the matter. She coldly replied, “That Fei Zhaoxing has always been as slick as ghost since young. If he were suspicious and retreated to the mountains, then how could it possibly be easy getting rid of him?”

“As long as he lives, our worries will never be put to rest. If the King finds him...”

“I know.” The Queen pondered for a while before instructing, “I will send someone to deal with Fei Zhaoxing. Father, go find Brother and tell him to not care about anything, just properly lead the troops and win over the other generals. As long as we have a good grasp on the military power, even the King cannot do anything about our Le Family. Hmph, with such a lesson right under

our nose, there is no way we will learn the blind loyalty of the House of Jing-An. They worked hard all their lives, only to be destroyed.”

Le Di nodded, “Madam is right.” He suddenly thought of something else, and he asked, “Does the King already know the news of Bai Pingting’s death?”

“Who else under the skies doesn’t know that, after the generals of Bei Mo mourned for her?” This thought made the Queen very angry, but at least her own father was the only one around, so she didn’t hide it at all. She gritted her teeth, “I don’t know what ability that servant woman has. She certainly isn’t a beauty either. When the King found out she died, he didn’t speak the whole day. I heard the King was planning to give his Order, speaking how her qin skills are Gui Le’s national treasure therefore she is to have the title of Gui Le’s Goddess of Qin as well as a statue erected for her. Isn’t this a joke?”

Le Di was very worried by this, “Madam, the King’s actions seems to be a warning.”

The Queen’s expression slightly darkened as she helplessly sighed. “Of course I know that. Now that the House of Jing-An is gone, our Le Family has become more and more powerful. Look, how many people in the courts who led troops are not nominated by you and Brother? Back then, the King managed to endure the Yangfeng incident, yet today, he dislikes me as the Queen even more for Bai Pingting.”

“Come to think of it, Madam is quite intelligent.” Le Di studied his daughter’s expression as he carefully proceeded, “The King is the sole master of the nation, therefore it is common that he has beautiful women around him. What is it for Madam to be a little more generous and let someone like that Li’er who came a few years ago become a Concubine? Yet, you forced the King to give her to the King of Dong Lin.”

The Queen harrumphed, “How did I not help her? With the King of Dong Lin, she was raised to Concubine Li and even gave birth to a princess. Father doesn’t need to say any more. I am annoyed right now so nothing will work well with me and yet Father still tries to annoy me even more.”

Le Di knew his daughter was jealous and sighed to himself. He still wanted to continue urging her but suddenly heard the sound of footsteps approaching. He

quickly stopped the conversation. He sat where he was originally and held the teacup he had yet to drink from. The Queen's closest maid, Yangrong, called from the outside. "Madam, the King has sent a messenger."

"Come in." The Queen allowed the manservant to enter. She drank her tea while asking, "What does the King have to say?"

"Report to Madam, the King has already made his Order. Bai Pingting will be given the title of the Qin Goddess of Gui Le and will have a statue erected in her memory at the Royal Residence main gates in three days. The King said that Madam is to be welcomed that day too, so that the two of you can worship together. This way, an example of how Gui Le women should do can be set."

Halfway through, the Queen had almost crushed the cup in her hand to a fine powder. She was trembling with anger. Le Di anxiously studied her expression beside her, dearly hoping that his daughter could have some patience.

The Queen swallowed her anger down and chuckled lightly, "Understood. Three days, Royal Residence main gates, correct? Go tell the King that I will prepare accordingly."

The manservant took her message and immediately went to report back.

Le Di closed the door. When he turned, he saw that his daughter's expression changed.

"As expected, as expected! It's that Bai Pingting again, even her soul refuses to give us a rest!" The Queen was grinding her delicate white teeth. "What on earth did she do that makes everyone do so much for her? How could a dignified King, who sent his Order to give a title to a petty maid, explain such an action to Gui Le's peasants?"

Le Di's expression was also downcast. He thought even further, "The King plans to do the same thing he did to the House of Jing-An to our Le Family. Although the House of Jing-An is no more, the people of Gui Le have not forgotten them. The House of Jing-An was convicted by the King, therefore he can't directly use the name of the House of Jing-An. He can only use one of their loyal maids, marking the maid that accompanied He Xia."

"Father is right." The Queen had calmed down, and her tone had slowed. She

hesitated before bitterly laughing, “But I definitely won’t believe that the King is only interested in raising her status without feeling anything towards Bai Pingting.”

“Hasn’t she died?”

“It’s worse if she’s dead.” The Queen’s long nails left long white scratches in the armrest of her wooden chair. “A man’s heart that cannot have what it wants is the strongest.”

There was nothing less reasonable, but at the same time, there was nothing more reasonable.

Bai Pingting’s death had spread throughout the world.

A maid serving a Ducal Residence had shocked the world.

She was the Qin Goddess of Gui Le, He Xia’s maid, the former highest ranking Bei Mo army official and at the same time, the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s wife.

Although they didn’t have a formal marriage, everyone who met her or the Duke of Zhen-Bei understood she was undoubtedly the sole wife in that indomitable hero’s lifetime.

Bai Pingting was gone.

Where was Chu Beijie?

Where was the former unrivalled general?

The Queen of Dong Lin stared at the people in front of her, taking in a deep breath. She resolutely said, “Genius Doctor Huo, there is no outsider here. There is no need to hide anything, just speak the truth.”

“Report to Queen, the King’s illness...” In just a few months, Dong Lin’s genius doctor Huo Yunan seemed to have aged ten years. White strands had mixed into his black beard. “I’m afraid he can’t last much longer.”

“Tell me the truth, how long does he have?”

“I’m afraid...afraid no longer than seven days.”

The Queen was stunned by this. It was a long time before her floating spirit could be collected in her body again. Her backbone could no longer support her

body after hearing this news, causing it to soften. She could only lean against the back of the chair to support herself. With the final thread of hope, she seemed to be praying at this famous doctor of Dong Lin that could direct the fate of a person's life and death. "Is it possible to lengthen those few days to a few months?"

"Queen." Even though Huo Yunan did not want to, he had to say it clearly. He steeled himself and said, "All methods have been used. After the King, there's..."

"Madam, Madam!" The conversation was suddenly interrupted by a maid running into the room. She bowed at the queen before hurriedly saying, "Madam, the King has awoken and is looking for Madam."

The Queen suddenly stood up, yet her sight blackened. She toppled, almost stumbling.

"Madam!"

"Queen!"

The maid and Huo Yunan exclaimed simultaneously as they both reached out to support her.

The Queen rubbed her temples and gained her footing, "It's fine."

Her face was very pale and so were her lips.

Ever since she heard the news of Bai Pingting's death, her face never recovered its colour once.

Everything was ruined.

In Bai Pingting's belly, there was the blood of the Royal House of Dong Lin.

Until now, the King and the Duke of Zhen-Bei had not had any males.

How did this happen? How on earth did this happen?

Back when Bei Mo and Yun Chang's three hundred thousand threatened their borders, why had they not expected such a fate today?

Her body and mind were almost shrivelled from her regrets. More problems kept surfacing before her. What karma did the Royal House of Dong Lin have with Bai Pingting in their past lives? This was too entangled, unable to be

cleared.

She hurriedly rushed to the bedroom where the man she had accompanied for all her life rested on the bed.

He too was once a hero of indomitable spirit. He was like the Duke of Zhen-Bei, who could wield a sword, chug down alcohol immediately and laugh heartily.

“King, I am here.” The Queen sat by the bed, lightly holding onto his hand.

He was so thin, so thin that his bones could be seen. So thin, it made her heart ache.

The Queen’s nose was sour and she couldn’t stop her tears flowing. “What does the King need?”

The King of Dong Lin’s eyes were already blank and without light.

“Where is Brother? Has Brother returned?” His voice was hoarse as he asked.

“I have already asked someone to look. The Duke of Zhen-Bei will return soon.”

The King of Dong Lin raised his head with difficulty as he looked at his own wife. “Queen, if you want to cry, cry.” Although his voice was hoarse and without energy, it was enveloped in warmth. “I understand in my heart that Beijie will never return.”

“King!”

“Bai Pingting, Yun Chang and Bei Mo’s three thousand that pressured the borders, as well as the Order to transfer the general of the Dragon Tiger Barracks. We...” He gasped for breath, “Our three countries used our military power to drag his wife to her death.”

“It’s all my fault...”

“No need to blame yourself.” The King of Dong Lin held onto his Queen’s hand. He squeezed it fiercely for a moment, as if seeming to transfer his final strength into his wife. “Queen is not to be blamed but the arrangement from the skies. The things we worried the most about have finally happened. Brother has always been stubborn, and I hoped that I could scrape him into being a little more indifferent. If anyone’s at fault, it is me.” He then turned around, gasping as he ordered, “You can all go. Senior Official, please guard the door.”

“Yes.” Chu Zairan had been guarding by the King of Dong Lin’s side. He had a great many experiences and knew the King of Dong Lin was about to say his farewells. His tears couldn’t help fall as he slumped down, knocking his head onto the ground. He then strided out of the room, closing the door behind him.

In the bedroom, only the King and Queen of Dong Lin remained.

“Queen, open that jade box at the head of this bed. Pass the Order in there for me.

The Queen took out the Order and softly advised, “King is unwell, so no need to be worried by national affairs right now. Leave this to the Senior Official to deal with, okay?”

The King of Dong Lin shook his head slowly. “Open it.”

The Queen saw that his attitude remained firm, so she didn’t insist further. She opened the Order and lowered her head to read. She read the headline, which said “Order to make the Queen in charge of the politics” in wide words. She was deeply shocked and said, “King, absolutely not...”

“This is my will.”

“King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei will definitely return. He is the King’s own brother and is part of the Dong Lin Royal House. There is no way he could give up his country for just a single woman.”

“Queen...” The King of Dong Lin’s voice was suddenly very soft as he strained to focus his eyes. He looked at the Queen, “Forget the Order. Come, sit by my side.”

Hearing such gentleness, the Queen’s heart broke even more. She obediently sat next to him. When she saw the King of Dong Lin reach out, she hurriedly brought her own hands to hold his.

“Queen, I have a question.”

“King, please ask. Anything is fine, I will answer.”

The King of Dong Lin’s voice was getting quieter and quieter. Looking very feeble, he murmured, “This is not a military or national affair. It is simply a personal question that I have wanted to ask Queen for a long time, but it’s a

little stupid. Now it has come to this, if I don't ask, I will never be able to hear the answer."

The Queen turned her head, quietly wiping away her tears. She softened her voice, "Please ask, King."

"Queen, our marriage was arranged by the former king. As a result, our fate as husband and wife were sealed, without any obstacles." The King of Dong Lin raised his head and studied the Queen, asking, "If we were like Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting, born between enemy countries and in positions directly opposing each other, would the Queen...still be willing to stay by my side for an entire lifetime?"

The Queen thought for a long time, before lightly spitting out one word, "Yes."
An entire lifetime.

Yes, she would, except it would be hard to do.

Even if the highest power interfered with them? If born as enemies, yet love attracted them, who would be the first to betray the other?

Was country more important, or would love be unbearable and one would head straight for their beloved's embrace?

Fortunately, they were not Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting.

But what if they were?

What if this misfortune had fallen on them?

The Queen closed her eyes, clutching tightly onto her husband's big, bony hand.

Yes, although it would be hard, like comparing the lightning in the skies and swords.

But, she would.

"We are in enemy countries," The King of Dong Lin said.

"Yes."

"In positions directly opposing each other."

"Yes."

“For an entire lifetime?”

The Queen was silent for a long time.

But she still spat out the one word, “Yes.”

The King of Dong Lin sucked in a deep breath. Winter was almost over, and the air brought a scent of Spring. Its coldness pleasantly swelled in his chest.

Yes, she would.

He closed his eyes.

A blessed smile played on his lips.

Several days later, Ruohan’s messenger had arrived at the Songsen Mountains again.

The snow on the ground had already melted, while small green buds of grass had popped out from the earth. Winter had not yet fully come, but everyone’s hearts were full of joyful longing.

The messenger not only brought the finest herbs Ruohan had collected from everywhere but also brought greetings from the King of Bei Mo.

“This millennium old ginger is a gift from the King.”

Ze Yin accepted it gratefully as he bowed in the direction to the distant Royal Residence.

The messenger was also one of Ze Yin’s former subordinates. Once he had conveyed his message and finished his gift delivery, he couldn’t help asking with concern. “Main General, is Missus...feeling better?”

Ze Yin shook his head slightly, his expression sad. “If there was just a little sign of improvement, then I would be much less worried. This is a sickness of the heart, meaning it’s not easy to cure.”

After Pingting was buried, Yangfeng held the luminous jade hairpin as she stood at the grave for a whole night, getting sick soon after.

The hairpin had flashed in the darkness as the undertakers covered it with yellow mud.

“Pingting’s death started with me.”

Pingting was such a clever person and clearly broke free, leaving He Xia and Chu Beijie. She had ridden a horse, alone, to reach Bei Mo. She wanted to look for her, to forget her previous misfortunes. Yet she herself had just kneeled, said a few words and swept Pingting between the gaps of the Bei Mo army and Chu Beijie.

The two armies had confronted each other, angry and ready to murder. Everything had started from there.

It had then spread to the dense forest of a hundred acres, to the Royal Residence of Dong Lin, to the secluded residence, to the Prince Consort Residence of Yun Chang, and finally in the snowy terrain of the Songsen Mountains.

Why did such a leisure and cheerful person like Pingting meet with such fate that even her bones were missing?

Yangfeng couldn't forgive herself.

All sorts of misfortunes she was the cause yet Pingting was the effect.

"Yangfeng, my beloved wife, do you still remember our child?" Ze Yin carefully supported her upwards. "You can't leave Qing'er. You promised me that you will always be with me in our lifetime. Cheer up and drink this medicine."

"Qing'er..." Yangfeng's eyes turned slightly.

"He keeps on crying for his mother. Yangfeng, don't blame yourself any more. Even if you ruin your own life, what can it do to bring her back? She will definitely disapprove of your actions up in heaven. Come, drink some medicine and get better soon." Ze Yin held the bowl of warm medicine in his hands and tested it first before giving bring it to Yangfeng's lips, "Drink, just think of it for Qing'er."

Yangfeng's chest felt empty. The image of Pingting's remains and her loney grave in the snow floated in her mind, not stopping for a single moment. After Ze Yin's words, a glimmer of sanity due to motherhood returned to her eyes at the mention of Qing'er.

She slowly raised her eyes and looked at her husband.

This person was once the Main General of Bei Mo. His face seemed distressed.

It was heartbreaking.

It was all because of her.

She sadly sighed and opened her lips.

Ze Yin heard her drink down the medicine and was delighted. “This is a prescription that Ruohan sent to search for. It’s been boiling for a long time now, so drink slowly and don’t choke.” He supported Yangfeng with one hand, the other holding the bowl. When he saw that Yangfeng had indeed drank the entire bowl of medicine, half of his worries were put to rest. He finally softened his voice, “Ruohan also said that this prescription needs to be given for a whole week...”

His words had yet finished, when Yangfeng shook in his arms. She suddenly straightened up, as she gurgled out on the side of the bed. All of the black soup that just entered her stomach was spilled all over the floor. Yangfeng seemed to have spit out all of her internal organs too. Her face was very pale. When she finally managed to raise her head, she began to fall straight down towards the bed.

“Yangfeng!” Ze Yin hurriedly grabbed onto her. He saw her eyes were tightly closed in his arms and her usual warm face had no trace of colour. His heart ached so much he had no idea to do, almost bringing him to tears. “My wife, what was that for? Does your heart only have Bai Pingting and not have Qing’er and me?”

Yangfeng had difficulty breathing. Hearing Ze Yin’s voice, she opened her eyes slightly. She bitterly smiled, “Of course I do. However, this sickness of the heart is too deep and can no longer be saved by medicine. We were brought up together and are like sisters, yet I...I killed her.”

“Don’t cry, don’t cry any more. Already so sick, such grief will cause...” Ze Yin’s large rough hand gently wiped away the tears on her face but ended up wiping much more than expected.

His heart was both anxious and upset. His tiger-like eyes couldn’t help become red.

Yangfeng burst into tears and wheezed for a long time. She lifted her head

again, looking at Ze Yin bitterly, “It’s not that I don’t feel bad about father and son, but just look at me. It seems that I’m about to accompany Pingting soon. The royal courts are just as dangerous as the battlefields, I don’t want Qing’er to follow the same road Pingting and Chu Beijie took. You have to promise to stay in this secluded forest and keep it, so that you will never leave this mountain and Qing’er will never come across such things. ...Promise me.”

Ze Yin listened to her words, which sounded ominously like her dying will. His entire body broke into a cold sweat and he could only hug Yangfeng tightly. He urged, “What rubbish are you sprouting? I won’t promise, I won’t promise anything!”

“Husband, I won’t last until spring.”

“Rubbish!”

“I can’t accompany you to admire the flowers or sew clothes for Qing’er...”

“Rubbish!”

“I am going to see Pingting and beg for her forgiveness...”

“Rubbish! Rubbish! Don’t say anymore!”

Ze Yin hugged tightly onto Yangfeng, restraining his sobs. He suddenly heard some rapid footsteps from outside the house and apparently there was someone running wildly in the corridor. His uneasiness suddenly became as he growled, “Who’s out there? Are you all deaf, did I not say not to disturb Madam?”

The door curtain rose, and a manservant ran inside. His expression was very strange as he wiped his sweat while saying to the furious Ze Yin, “Main General, someone wants to see you.”

“I’m not seeing anyone! Scram!”

“S-She...”

“Madam needs silence. Whoever it is, just scram!”

“S-S-She...” The manservant was frowning, as if he didn’t believe what he was about to say at all, “She said that she was Bai...Bai Pingting!”

Bai Pingting?

Ze Yin and Yangfeng , suddenly wide-eyed, were both shocked.

How was this possible?

Even though Ze Yin had been on the battlefield for many years and encountered all sorts of unusual situations, he was so dazed that he had no idea for the longest time what to do. He shouted, “Hurry, hurry and welcome her in!”

“Husband...” Yangfeng nervously leaned in his chest.

Hearing the news, it felt like her disease had retreated thirty miles. Yangfeng’s eyes had gained some fresh colour as she timidly stare at the door curtain.

Ze Yin’s eyes were as big as round as saucers too. He couldn’t help feel worried and secretly thought that if she was a fake, she would deal significant harm to Yangfeng’s heart. No matter who the imposter was, he would chop her up into pieces immediately.

Yet who had such courage to pretend to be Bai Pingting in front of Yangfeng?

Not to mention, it was strange how an imposter would know the location of their secluded residence.

During his uneasiness, there was already movement in the corridor. The curtain then began to slowly rise.

Yangfeng’s five fingers tightly grabbed onto Ze Yin’s clothes as she forced herself to look at the doorway. As the curtain lifted, the light sprinkled through the doorway enter the room. It dazzled the people inside and Yangfeng could only see little flowers before a face became printed into her eyes.

“Yangfeng, why are you sick?” That gentle voice was very familiar. Just hearing one word was enough to make people cry.

Yangfeng’s caught her breath as she studied the face before her very carefully. She finally exhaled, saying, “Oh god...” The single breath wrestled out the rest of her energy, and her body softened as it fell back into Ze Yin’s arms.

Pingting was taken aback. “Yangfeng! What’s wrong?”

“Wife, Wife!”

The two people hurriedly shouted over and over again, and the servants

brought over a warm towel. The towel was placed on Yangfeng's forehead. She slowly woke up, her eyes pinned on Pingting as if afraid that just a blink would make her disappear. Her voice was soft as she exclaimed, "Pingting, you're still alive? Oh God, for once you are merciful."

"Did you all think I died? No wonder when the servants looked at me, their gazes were all weird." Pingting's face was apologetic, "It's all my fault for not keeping the promise of three days. You and Zuiju were all worried to death that I wasn't found, right? Where's Zuiju? Bring her over so her worries may be put back to rest soon."

"Who's Zuiju?"

Pingting hesitated. "Did she not come to you?"

Ze Yin and Yangfeng had a very strange expression. They shook their heads together.

Pingting knew that something was wrong. She hurriedly asked, "If you didn't see Zuiju, didn't send help into the mountains, didn't find my traces, how did you guess I was dead?"

"We found a woman's clothes and bones torn to bits by wolves at the foot of the mountain, alongside the luminous jade hairpin Yangfeng gave you. Yangfeng knew that..."

"Oh God..." Pingting had completely stiffened. She covered her mouth as her eyes widened. Several moments later, she gave a piercing cry of grief, "Zuiju!"

The storm on the Songsen Mountains seemed to replay.

As if in a trance, Zuiju turned around, holding onto her silver needles. The tip of the silver needles gleamed alongside the glowing snow. It got brighter and brighter as if this single needle could light up the entire world.

After the brightness, the world suddenly became dark. Pingting felt immense fatigue, her field of vision becoming blurry. Her knees then collapsed as she fell towards the ground.

Yangfeng was startled. "Pingting! Pingting! What's wrong?" She struggled off the bed to look.

Ze Yin was terrified she would trip and supported her, “Yangfeng, be careful...”

“Don’t worry about me, go look at her! Hurry!”

Ze Yin picked up the fainted Pingting, ordering, “Doctor, bring the doctor over!”

“Hurry hurry, bring the best ginseng here.”

“Madam, that’s for you...”

Now that Yangfeng had seen Pingting, the root of her illness was gone and so she was much better. She creased her eyebrows, “How could I be sick when Pingting is still alive? Hurry!” She ordered them. Only until she saw the servants bring out the ginseng did she finally relax. After all, she was sick for a long time and suddenly felt her heart jump too much. Her limbs were drained of energy. She feebly instructed a small maid, “Go, boil my medicine too and then give it to me.”

Alive.

Yeah, all were still alive.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 52

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch52

It was very warm.

After enduring the wind and snow of the Songsen Mountains, as well nights under rocks and snow, this thick cotton blanket was very warm.

The broken bone remained painful, and it was enough to jolt a person in coma.

She opened her eyes and couldn't help reach out to touch her wound at her leg. Someone had clumsily bandaged it for her, and she could smell the fragrance of the herbs from inside it.

However, she kept on thinking something was wrong. Her eyebrows remained clenched as she reached into the blankets, but all she felt on her fingertips was smooth, naked skin.

"Ah..." Zuiju was surprised and quickly retracted her hand.

"Ah," mocked a man standing in the shadows of a dark corner in the room.

Zuiju widened her eyes, "Where are my clothes?"

"In the snow."

That's right, snow, Yangfeng, get help...

Pingting...

Damn, Pingting!

She hurriedly touched her hair, but it was empty.

"Where is my luminous jade hairpin?" Zuiju anxiously asked.

"In the snow. I even painstakingly went on to find a woman's corpse and put it

with that. But, maybe more than a half has already entered a wolf's stomach."

"How long has it been?"

"How long has what been?"

Zuiju was very worried about Pingting. She hurriedly asked, "How long has it been since you cornered me into a wolf pack? Half a day? A day? You left my clothes and hairpin in the snow? How can I get it back? I have to get it back."

"Half a month."

"What?" Zuiju looked at the corner in disbelief.

Fanlu stepped out from the corner, his exquisite light crossbow still in his hands. The corners of his mouth lifted, "The snow on the streets have already melted. You've been sleeping for half a month."

It felt as if Zuiju's chest had been smashed with a hammer. She was almost unable to breathe. She shook her head, "Impossible, that's impossible."

Three days, Pingting had said, she would wait for three days.

She was waiting in a rocky area of the Songsen Mountains and her pulse was not steady.

"I've had enough of your shouting. How could I take you around if you weren't conscious?"

"You..."

He stopped her, asking, "I saved your life, why are you not thanking me?"

Zuiju fiercely glared at him. She was silent for a while before she shouting through clenched teeth, "You bastard! Damn you! Damn you to hell! Why did you harm me? Why did you save me? I am going to kill you! Kill you!"

She cursed him for a little under half an hour, until she panted, exhausted. Her wound on her leg began to sting again, so she could only stop. She hugged the blanket on the bed as she gasped for breath.

Who knew what that Fanlu's thick skin was made of. No matter how terrible her insults were, he just stood there, listening, with an indifferent expression. After hearing Zuiju cease, he immediately asked, "Had enough?"

“No!” There was no way Zuiju’s anger had calmed. She suddenly raised her head, gritting her teeth to continue, “You scumbag, you six year-old toothless brute who only eats eggs...”

She had always been sharp tongued, and she even brought out all sorts of curses from the various four countries.

Fanlu listened and listened until a smile gradually formed on his face. He even insolently dared to lean against the wall as he watched her. Zuiju hated him even more. She took a deep breath and cursed even louder. He listened cheerfully for a while, and suddenly retrieved his smile. His face became serious, “That’s enough. If you yell any more, I’ll pull your blanket.”

“You...” Zuiju hesitated and actually stopped.

She wasn’t afraid of death, but she was completely naked underneath the blanket right now. If he pulled her blanket, he would see everything. It was so shameful, she couldn’t even face death. There weren’t many women under the world who were not afraid of such a threat.

Fanlu watched her and couldn’t help but smirk evilly again.

Zuiju was silent for a long time. She seemed to soften. Her voice was harsh, “I don’t appreciate you saving my life, just go ahead and kill me.” Her anger had gone, and her sadness had enveloped her heart. She shrank back in the bed and turned away.

Pingting had been in the mountains for half a month. Perhaps she was no longer in the world. Zuiju couldn’t stop the tears from pouring out of her eyes, though she held some hope in her heart. She thought of how this enemy thought of herself as Bai Pingting, meaning there was one less person in the Songsen Mountains trying to harm Pingting. Perhaps the sky had pity, letting Pingting survive. Thinking that much, she dearly wanted to fly to the Songsen Mountains to look. But like this, how could she go?

This secret was something she mustn’t tell this wicked man.

Her tears rolled down her cheeks like a broken string of pearls.

Fanlu watched her huddled, seeming even more petite on the bed. Her shoulders constantly shook. It appeared she was crying, yet he didn’t care. He

turned to walk out of the room, returning soon after with a plate of food.

“Eat something.”

Zuiju didn't have the appetite and bitterly detested Fanlu. She gritted her teeth and remained silent.

Fanlu saw that she didn't move and knew what she was thinking. He coldly said, “I am not begging you, I am ordering you. Obediently eat, or don't blame me if I show no pity.”

Zuiju felt the blanket that covered her body fall slightly. She hurriedly flipped and sat up, clutching tightly to the blanket. She was both scared and angry, “You...what do you want?”

The corners of Fanlu's mouth rose to a smile, yet his eyes were unusually cruel. “I painstakingly saved you, fed you rice porridge everyday on the road. I don't know how much effort I spent. If you've really made up your mind to die, then you might as well pay me back a bit.”

Zuiju saw him reach out his hand and hurriedly scooted further into the bed. Her eyes were full of fear.

Fanlu only intended to frighten her and only stretched out a little before stopping, returning his hand to his chest. He continued to lazily lean against the wall. He beckoned to the meal by the bed with his chin. “Eat it all.”

Zuiju's distinct black and white eyes became slightly bloodshot. She glared fiercely at him until he seemed to move again. She reluctantly gave up and picked up the bowl, eating the food in tiny mouthfuls.

In the snowy mountains, she had been more hungry than not, and when she was out, all she had was rice porridge. Although she was very worried and angry, just after two mouthfuls, her entire stomach began to growl again. The more she ate, the better it tasted. In the end, she had not only finished the entire bowl of rice but also the other two dishes.

As she put down the plate, she raised her head, only to realise that hateful guy had been watching her eat all along. She scowled at him. She was afraid that Fanlu would really take away her blanket and didn't dare yell any more apart from giving him a fierce glare.

“Do you glare at the Duke of Zhen-Bei like that?” Fanlu suddenly asked.

Zuiju hesitated for a while and remembered he thought she was Bai Pingting. She pursed her lips, knowing that she would never clearly explain to Fanlu. “It’s none of your business.”

Fanlu didn’t say anything, just quietly assessed Zuiju.

His gaze was both impolite and bold. Even though Zuiju clutched tightly to her blankets, she still had the wrong impression that he was trying to see her naked body underneath. She endured it for a while, until she couldn’t stand it any longer. She returned Fanlu’s gaze and challenged, “What are you looking at?”

Fanlu didn’t reply, just stared at her for another while. He then said, “Rumours has it that you’re not beautiful, but I think you’re not too bad.”

Zuiju’s heart jolted at this. She looked at him warily, her ten fingers grasping the blanket even tighter.

The two did not speak. The air began to thicken, causing it to be more difficult to breathe than usual.

Fanlu didn’t walk away. He just continued to assess Zuiju in silence.

Zuiju thought his gaze was even scarier than a wolf’s, causing all of her hairs to rise. She suddenly felt something hard hit her backbone, only to realise that she had unwittingly retreated to the other side of the bed. She was now against the wall.

“Where is this?” Zuiju opened her mouth to ask.

Fanlu’s mouth twitched, but he didn’t answer.

Zuiju secretly fumed. “What are you smiling for?”

Fanlu replied, “I am betting with myself whether you would talk to me within the burning of one stick of incense. As expected, you did.” His evil smirk revealed his white teeth. “Are you afraid of me?”

“Hmph, dream on.”

Her words had yet to fall when Fanlu suddenly rushed forwards like a wild beast.

“Ah!” Zuiju exclaimed, but she was crushed by the wall and could not move any further.

When she opened her eyes, Fanlu’s face had popped into her sight, about a foot away.

“What...what are you doing?”

“Judging by your expression, it seems you don’t know yet.” Fanlu mercilessly pinched her chin, “Has Chu Beijie never touched you, even though you’ve been with him for so long?”

Zuiju had always accompanied and been spoiled by her Teacher. Wherever she went, the title of the genius doctor’s disciple had followed, so even the Royal House of Dong Lin had treated her with respect. There was no way she had ever been threatened by a man so close before.

Fanlu’s warm breath brushed over her face. He was indeed much scarier than the pack of wolves. Zuiju was terrified and embarrassed, she hurriedly said, “Go away, just go away!”

“Who are you?”

“Bai Pingting, I’m Bai Pingting!”

“Bai Pingting?” Fanlu harrumphed once, let her go and got off the bed.

Zuiju felt like she had just survived the clutches of death and she was somewhat relieved. She pressed even tighter against the wall.

Fanlu was born a spy. He was clever, understood how to read expressions, gaining the most important information from the enemy. How could he possibly not understand?

This woman was not Bai Pingting.

Whatever reason she had for having the luminous jade hairpin, she was not Bai Pingting.

When the Senior Official learned that Bai Pingting had died, he immediately raised Fanlu’s rank in joy, letting him become the governor of Qierou City.

He risked the death penalty for committing fraud, falsely reporting Pingting’s

death. He thought that he had gotten a valuable commodity in return.

In the end, it was all a downright joke.

All sorts of different outcomes flipped around in Fanlu's mind. From the corner of his eye, he monitored Zuiju who looked at him warily.

This woman wasn't Bai Pingting. She wasn't worth anything at all.

Not to mention, if the Senior Official knew what he had done, then death was sure to follow.

Kill her?

His hand slowly reached out towards the crossbow placed on the table.

However, he stopped when he touched the familiar handle made of twisted tendons.

What use was killing her? If Bai Pingting appeared before the eyes of the world's people again, then even if he killed this woman, his lies will still be uncovered.

Fanlu turned his head, studying at the hostile woman on the bed.

She had big, raven black eyes, bushy black hair and stubborn lips.

That day, why did he seem possessed and end up saving her?

Apart from being a valuable commodity, what on earth was it about her that made him so fearless, risking his life to steal her from the mouths of the wolves?

He stared at her and stared for a long time, finally saying, "This is a place called Qierou, a small town in Yun Chang." He studied Zuiju, the corners of his mouth lifting into that evil smirk that only belonged to himself. "I have just been appointed the city governor here and am the highest ranking official here. If you want to run, I'll hunt you back like a rabbit." He hesitated before adding, "Then, I will peel you like a rabbit and display you, naked, on the walls."

Yangfeng drank the medicine on her bed before lying down. Her body felt freshened but her heart was worried about Pingting. She beckoned to summon a maid.

The maid timidly said, "Madam, the Main General has said that Bai Pingting is

in the guest room at the end of the corridor. Main General will immediately see Madam after the doctor has taken your pulse and set a description. Miss Bai also has attendants looking after her, so Madam only has to properly rest.”

Yangfeng sat up from the bed and swivelled her legs to put on shoes. “Don’t worry about the Main General; there’s me. I won’t force myself. Just one peek and then I will lay back down. I haven’t seen Pingting’s appearance clearly yet. That encounter wasn’t long ago. What are you standing there for? Help support me.”

The maid was terribly afraid that Ze Yin would be angry, but seeing Yangfeng’s expression, she was also terribly afraid of Yangfeng. She was torn by this dilemma for a breath moment, and in the end, she came forwards to support Yangfeng. She called someone else to help, and the two supported her.

The maid confirmed, “Really just a peek? If the Main General decides to blame us, Madam must put in a few kind words for us.”

“Understood.” Yangfeng chuckled, “You two are just too clever. Why are you so afraid of the Main General, are you not afraid of me?”

She leaned on the shoulders of the two maids, slowly stepping out of the room.

They had managed to step onto the corridor, but happened to see Ze Yin and the doctor come out of the guest room. His face darkened as he strode towards them. He wrapped his arms around Yangfeng and held her up, helplessly reprimanding, “Did I not tell you to lay down properly? Why are you out of bed again? Now that Pingting’s here, isn’t she here for you to see at any time?”

He coldly glared at the two maids who were so scared they jumped right back.

Yangfeng was in his arms, feeling comfortable and cozy. She raised her head to look at her beloved man and smiled sweetly, “Don’t blame them. How could they not obey an order from the dignified Main General’s wife? Husband, how is Pingting? Is she very sick?”

“Her body is too weak. It certainly wasn’t easy to last such a rough journey.” Ze Yin carried her back to her room, while whispering, “She’s pregnant.”

Yangfeng was stunned, her face full of surprise.

“It must be Chu Beijie’s child,” she whispered back.

“That’s right.” Ze Yin sighed, “From Ruohan’s letter, received yesterday, it seems the King of Dong Lin’s illness has gotten worse. His two princes are both murdered in the hands of our King and He Xia...” He bent down to put Yangfeng into bed before tucking her in.

“The blood of the Royal House is in Pingting’s belly.” Yangfeng slowly spat out this phrase and asked, “Then where is Chu Beijie? Where is he now?”

“No one knows of his whereabouts. Ever since hearing about Pingting’s death, it seems he has disappeared. Our King is delighted about this and held a three day banquet in the Royal Residence. If he knew that Pingting did not die and has his child, he would immediately rush back.” Ze Yin’s voice trailed off and looked at Yangfeng.

Yangfeng was also very hesitant. She carefully thought for a long time, sighing. “Although he is pitiful, he is also hateful. Even though he seems utterly heartbroken about Pingting today, perhaps if his country were to be in crisis tomorrow, he would immediately offer up Pingting. From what I see, the world under the skies already believes that Pingting is gone, so why don’t we take advantage of the wrongs? Let Pingting lead a peaceful life.”

“This...”

“This of course has to be what Pingting herself wants. I’ll talk to her about it. She will understand.” Yangfeng paused again for a while, “After such chaos, I will never let Pingting leave my line of sight again. Whether I am rich or impoverished, no matter what the outcome, we sisters will always be together. That way we can protect each other.”

Ze Yin knew that in Yangfeng’s heart, she still deeply regretted what had happened in the battle of Kanbu. This was a guilt she could never compensate Pingting in her lifetime.

But as long as Yangfeng was fine, what else mattered? Ze Yin never hesitated when he acted, and he rapidly nodded his head. “Fine. If Pingting decides to live with us in seclusion, then we will immediately pack up our belongings and move to somewhere else. This place is no longer safe. Ruohan knows, the King knows and even Chu Beijie knows. There is no way of knowing whether there will be

someone else who stumbles here in the future.”

“This time, let’s not have any more connections with Bei Mo. Even if it’s Ruohan or the King, let’s stop all correspondence.”

Ze Yin studied her and lowered his voice, “Okay.”

“Husband...” A wave of gratitude whelmed up in Yangfeng.

The snow was melting, and the wind of spring was already on its way.

Pingting, do you still remember how we sang for fun, folded willow leaves, laughed at wave patterns at Prince He Su’s Residence? Do you remember playing qin and celebrating your birthday at the Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Today, He Su has become the sole master of his nation, and the House of Jing-An was in ashes.

He Xia travelled a thousand miles in one go, entered Yun Chang and became its Prince Consort.

The metamorphosis of life, without experience, is truly difficult to predict.

But it’s still nice. You and I are still here.

Because Ze Yin really wanted Yangfeng’s illness to get better soon, he strictly ordered Yangfeng was not to leave her bed. He sent other people to attend to Pingting and naturally covered everything. He didn’t feel pained at all and poured all sorts of precious herbs into her care like flowing water.

Yangfeng couldn’t help it, she could only endure the seven or eight days. She obediently listened to the doctor and drank her medicine everyday at the right time. Now that she almost recovered, Ze Yin would occasionally bring their son to see his mother. She happily held onto her son, smelling and kissing him. She cooed, “Dear Qing’er, go see Aunt Pingting on behalf of your mother. There’s a tiny younger brother in her belly, and he’ll play with you in the future.”

Ze Qing was barely a year old, so it was impossible for him to understand Yangfeng’s words. His shiny black eyes looked left and right. He randomly opened his mouth to grin and laugh at her.

Ze Yin stood at one side, watching mother and son. He found this funny, “How do you know Pingting has a tiny younger brother in her belly?”

“Guessed, obviously. Is Pingting any better?”

Ze Yin’s expression darkened slightly. He shook his head, “She doesn’t say much and seems very upset. Is Zuiju her maid?”

Yangfeng shook her head. “No such person existed in the Jing-An Ducal Residence. If she is a maid, it must be someone Chu Beijie gave her.” Although she had never seen Zuiju before, she pitied her fate from being torn by the wolves but was not as distraught like Pingting. Changing the topic, she asked Ze Yin, “Judging by her looks, does she still want to be with Chu Beijie? Chu Beijie has done terrible wrong to her, but she has his flesh and blood. I’m just afraid that Pingting’s heart will soften.”

Ze Yin hesitated at this. He led troops in a clear and logical formation, but this was a subject he didn’t know much about at all. He scratched his head and said, “A woman’s heart is much too hard to guess. How could I possibly tell?”

Yangfeng charmingly looked at him under her eyelashes, smiling, “I can tell. Main General, someone here has recovered long ago. Can’t you just have pity on me and take back the strict order so I may get off this bed? It’s not as impossible as rotting water or door hinges never being eaten by woodlice. Sick people need to walk a bit to get better soon too.”

Ze Yin saw her smile as happy as blooming flowers. His body and mind were intoxicated. Thinking about Yangfeng trapped in bed for several days, he couldn’t help soften his heart. He stroked the loosened strands on her silky black hair and said, “Don’t push yourself and walk so soon after getting a little bit better. The winter snow has only just melted; it’s still very cold. If you want to see Pingting, I’ll carry you there.” He then stood and picked Yangfeng in his arms.

Little Ze Qing was left on the bed. He cried and yelled as if unsatisfied.

Ze Yin smiled as he watched him. “Good son, you’re still young. When you grow older, you can hold your own woman like this.”

Yangfeng watched her husband teach their son and hurriedly shook her head, both amused and angry.

The guest room was very silent. The two entered, like honey and sugar, but their sunny mood was whipped back down.

“Pingting?”

Pingting was awake. She too received Ze Yin’s strict order to not get out of bed. She was currently sitting on the bed, her upper body leaning against a pillow at the head of the bed. Her lower half was covered by the blanket. Hearing Yangfeng’s voice, she seemed to be somewhat surprised. She turned towards them, her long black hair flickering past her shoulders. “Yangfeng?”

There was still some of her merry old self, but her cheeks had completely flattened down, creating a chilling feeling.

“Pingting, Pingting...” Yangfeng’s eyes became red, and she suddenly began to cry.

Ze Yin put Yangfeng down, arranging it so that she and Pingting were sitting side by side on the bed.

“Why are you crying?” Pingting lightly grabbed onto Yangfeng, softly chuckling, “I heard you were sick. Are you finally fine to see me now?” She raised her head and studied her.

Ze Yin stood like a steel tower at one side, watching over his wife protectively.

“Hm, much better.” Yangfeng then asked, “What about you?”

Pingting gratefully replied, “I’m much better too, thanks to Main General.”

“Have you had fetal medicine at the right times?”

“Yes.” Pingting lowered her head, gently stroking her slightly protruding stomach. “The child is very obedient and hasn’t kicked or messed around today.”

Yangfeng sighed. “You know how important your child is, so don’t bottle all your sadness up. Pingting, don’t blame yourself any more. That Zuiju is already dead. You can’t ruin your own life. What can it do to bring her back? Since you two are so close, she will definitely disapprove of your actions up in heaven.”

Ze Yin frowned, thinking that he had heard this before.

When Pingting heard the name “Zuiju”, her smile completely flew away. She sighed and raised her eyes, “I understand that idea, but my heart hurts. When I think of her, it’s like my heart is being stabbed by needles. I asked her to go down the mountain because I wanted to save her. Having one survive was better than

both dying from hunger or cold. I never thought that she'd..."

Yangfeng saw she was unhappy again and quickly changed the topic. "I came here to discuss something else with you today. First of all, I have already decided that I won't let you float around the four countries any more, causing me all this excess worry. Why don't we move to somewhere else and live in seclusion together? Now it's come to this, even if it's not for you, at least think for your child. Don't just grieve, plan out your future too."

Pingting knew her words were right. She didn't want Yangfeng to worry again. She cheered up and nodded her head thoughtfully. "Living in seclusion doesn't sound too bad, but your Main General is far too famous and has a whole hoard of servants as well as great wealth. Where could you start living in seclusion? Even if you changed to another place, maybe in just three days, another general of Bei Mo will find you. I don't want to let anyone know that I'm still alive, so I think I'll just find another peaceful place to live with my child."

Yangfeng realised that she hadn't mentioned that hateful man, Chu Beijie. She did seem much more energetic than before. She had been dearly excited, but as she heard more, she found out that Pingting had other plans. She hurriedly asked, "So what? We can dismiss our manservants and maids. Since we plan to live in seclusion, then what need is there for the luxury of the Main General Residence?"

Pingting studied her and shook her head. "You're not the same as me. I've gone through all sorts of bitter experiences. I've had officials steal my bags, climbed a snowy mountain and suffered hunger. I know what poverty is like. From a young age, you were sheltered in the Prince's Residence, and when you came to Bei Mo, you became the Main General's wife. How could you possibly last through such bitter world experiences?"

Yangfeng straightened on the bed, solemnly replying, "Pingting, I'm not joking here. After I learned you left the Bei Mo Main General Residence to head for Dong Lin to see Chu Beijie, my regret almost broke my intestines. You were sheltered in the Jing-An Ducal Residence too and treated like the only daughter of a rich family. How could I not be able to experience the bitter things you did?" She suddenly thought of something and dismissed her maids. Then she remembered that it was not out of her own decision. She stopped to turn to look

at Ze Yin.

Ze Yin lowered his voice, "Don't worry, I'll arrange it."

When he had asked Yangfeng to marry him back then, he had long wanted to leave the battlefield and live in seclusion, wholeheartedly wanting to peacefully live out his life with her.

What did manservants or maids mean to him?

Yangfeng knew his kindness and was both touched and grateful.

Pingting watched the two and suddenly thought of Chu Beijie. The corners of her heart stung, but she refused to let it overwhelm her. She feared Yangfeng would see its traces, so she turned away from them, wiping the corners of her watery eyes on the pillow.

Ze Yin did as he said. That night, he summoned all of the maids and manservants into the hall, saying, "I have already promised Yangfeng to live in seclusion, this time never coming out again. Since we will be living in a very rural area, we will not need so many manservants. You are all young determined to serve this country hence you can all go back to the capital. I will write you a testimonial letter so the Main General Ruohan can organise you to go elsewhere. As for maids, all those who have homes can go home. Those who don't have one are free to leave as well and find another home. All of the furniture, furnishings in this room are mostly earned through rewards from my military achievements. All of them are treasures of the Royal Residence. Divide them all amongst yourselves, whether you use the money you gain to invest, or dowry or pension, anything is fine."

When his words came out, everyone cried out.

Ze Yin's expression did not change as he lowered his voice, "You all know my temper. Even three army troops must immediately listen to just a simple scolding, not to mention you all. Don't drag this on. No feast can forever continue under the skies. To scatter, happily and freely, is the true nature of my Bei Mo's sons and daughters. Also, there is an extra person here who you have all more or less guessed her identity. The world under the skies believes that she is dead. Not a word about the fact that she is still alive is to be spread outside. You all have accompanied me for many years, so I believe in you. However, I still

would like you to swear here that you will never tell anyone.”

When he finished, everyone understood that Ze Yin had already decided.

The servants accompanied Ze Yin’s extensive travels and each were hot-blooded men. They had indeed hoped that Ze Yin would one day return to the capital to help with national affairs like last time. Hearing Ze Yin’s words, they immediately swore they would never speak one word about Bai Pingting’s survival.

The maids served the Main General Residence since young. Each were loyal to Ze Yin, and although they did not understand military or national affairs, they knew Bai Pingting was the Main General’s wife’s good friend and also left their promise.

Ze Yin worked orderly. He immediately called for brush and ink, swiftly writing the testimonial letters for the manservants. He then handed out the various treasures to each of the maids, so that they would not have to worry about the hunger and cold in the future. He was busy until late at night, until finally everything had been arranged, yet a difficult problem surfaced.

Guard Weiting was the only one who refused to leave. His eyes were bloodshot as he said, “I’ve been with Main General for so long, where else is there for me to go? Main General knows I have a foul temper, and if other generals order me around, I won’t listen. Main General at least needs someone to help carry water or herd cattle, even in the mountains right? If you refuse to take me along, then I shall die here today.” He pulled out his sword and placed it on his neck.

His main problem was that he couldn’t read expressions, resulting in conflict between a great number of generals, including Ruohan. However, when he fought, he was not afraid of death, and his power was commendable. Because of this, Ze Yin valued him and had always kept him by his side.

Ze Yin knew his temper and perhaps if he did shake his head, perhaps he would really slice his neck. He suddenly remembered Weiting offended many important generals of Bei Mo. Even if he were recommended back, he would be bullied or worse. He could only nod, “Oh well, you can stay then.”

Apart from Weiting, there was also Ze Yin’s nurse and Uncle Xu who had watched him grow up. The two of them were both very old, so naturally Ze Yin

had kept them by his side to repay his debts until their dying breath.

“All has been done. All that remains is to find a good place to live in seclusion.”

Pingting considered this for a while, replying, “I know of a good place. There’s a quiet little village on the foot of the other side of the Songsen Mountains. There’s land that can be cultivated, as well as a grassland that can be grazed. Although it’s a little poor, all of the people there are kind-hearted.”

“If even you praise this place, it must be good.” Yangfeng always trusted in Pingting’s opinions. She asked Ze Yin, “Then there, okay?”

Ze Yin lovingly looked at her. “If you like it, then there is fine.”

“There’s something else,” said Pingting, “I would like to move Zuiju’s grave too. I don’t want her to be left alone here.”

Yangfeng replied, “That’s easy. We’ll take out her remains and take it on the road.”

“Zuiju’s Teacher is Dong Lin’s genius doctor Huo Yunan.” Pingting took out a letter from her sleeves, “I heard Zuiju is his only disciple and beloved, star pupil. I have written a letter. Please find someone to pass it on for me, Main General. If he asks who wrote it, just say it was from one of Zuiju’s friends.”

Ze Yin took it, “Rest assured, I will definitely get it sent.”

When they returned to the room, however, Ze Yin asked Yangfeng, “Do you think this letter should really be sent?”

Yangfeng stiffened, “Why not?”

“Huo Yunan is Dong Lin’s genius doctor and often enters the Royal Residence. He has a deep friendship with the Royal House of Dong Lin. If this letter is sent and Huo Yunan gets suspicious that it was Zuiju who died, what would happen to Pingting? I’m afraid he might make the connection.”

Only then did Yangfeng understand. Her expression changed, “Pingting has Chu Beijie’s flesh and blood in her belly. Royal House wars are terrifying as well, not to mention Chu Beijie has disappeared. If she were swept into the wars for the throne...will they send someone to kill Pingting?”

Ze Yin nodded, “I’m worried about that.”

“Having said that, this letter must not be sent.” Yangfeng only cared about Pingting’s safety, nothing for a random Dong Lin genius doctor. She thought a little, set a plan, and reached out. “Give it to me.” When she got the letter, she passed it straight into the flame of the candle. She watched the flame rise and whispered slowly, “Pingting, I know you’re good-hearted and can’t bear the thought of Zuiju’s teacher looking for his disciple. However, your safety is very important, so let me decide for you this time.”

Everyone in the secluded residence was used to Ze Yin’s vigorous and resolute style of living. Although they were all reluctant to leave, no one cried.

In just a few days, everyone scattered in groups. The various antiques inside the room were also removed.

Only Ze Yin’s family of three, Pingting, Uncle Xu, the nurse and Weiting were left behind, a total of seven. They took the remaining money Ze Yin had and set off on their journey, this time, really leaving the national affairs of Bei Mo behind.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 53

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch53

When Gui Changqing learned of Bai Pingting's death, it felt like the huge stone in his heart had been put to rest. He was so happy he immediately raised the soldier in question, Fanlu, to a city governor, after strictly telling him to keep it a secret.

He didn't quite exactly know whether the situation had really improved, but it seemed that the hanging clouds of unnecessary loss of life over Yun Chang had suddenly dispersed. Not only did the war not begin, Chu Beijie was still utterly distraught over the matter about Pingting and disappeared. Dong Lin was an entire mess now and was completely incapable of threatening Yun Chang. The command flag in the Prince Consort's hands had also returned to the Princess as there were no more wars to be fought.

"Haha," laughed Gui Changqing, overcome by his emotions, "It seemed this Bai Pingting step was done well."

He did hope that others wouldn't find out Bai Pingting's death had to do with Yun Chang. He had kept the secret for several days, waiting until Bei Mo had openly mourned and spread Bai Pingting's death to the rest of the world. Only then did he head to the Royal Residence to tell Princess Yaotian.

"Died?" Yaotian was taken aback. She lowered her voice, "Didn't I tell Senior Official the battle is over hence it's fine to leave Pingting to her own life and death. Why didn't you let her go?"

"Princess misunderstood. How could I not obey Princess' orders? Bai Pingting attempted to bypass the checkpoints of the Yun Chang border, thinking to enter

Bei Mo by crossing the Songsen Mountains. Unfortunately, her wisdom brought her to her demise. She met wolves in the mountains.”

Yaotian was dubious. She remained silent for a while, before frowning, “Does the Prince Consort know?”

“The news has already spread. Prince Consort should already know.” Yaotian sighed heavily. Gui Changqing was curious, “What’s wrong, Princess? Bai Pingting died a premature death. Is this not to the benefit of Princess?”

Yaotian’s smile was bitter. “If Prince Consort knows that Bai Pingting died, his mood must be terrible. If he’s upset, how could I possibly not be either?”

Gui Changqing saw Yaotian deeply cherished He Xia and was secretly alarmed by this. He quickly changed the subject. “Come to think of it, last time Princess gave an Order to build the army a treasury and granary. I have temporarily suspended this Order.”

Yaotian looked at Gui Changqing surprised. “Military affairs are urgent. Even if we hurry, it’s still not quick enough. Why did Senior Official suspend it?”

“I think, this isn’t quite right.”

“He is a dignified Prince Consort. What isn’t quite right about him being in charge of a single treasury and granary?”

“Princess, listen to my words.” Gui Changqing stood up and took two steps forward. His tone was very warm. “The Prince Consort already has military power, and the only thing that can control him is grain and money. If he has both, what else does Princess have to rein back the Prince Consort?”

Yaotian sighed faintly. “I know Senior Official is thinking about me. However, I am already husband and wife with the Prince Consort. He has been working hard day and night for Yun Chang, however, we keep suspecting him and trying to hold him back. Senior Official, is that really okay? He and I are now one. Don’t forget, his future son will become the master of Yun Chang one day.”

From ancient history and even now, the feelings between man and woman had always been the most difficult to organise. Many people had fallen into its trap, and they could not be pulled out whatsoever.

If Yaotian was a normal woman, this kind of thinking was utterly perfect in every way. However, she was the representative of Yun Chang's Royal House.

Gui Changqing knew it would be difficult to convince further, but he had to continue. He coughed once before softly continuing, "Princess, do you remember the words you said to me on your wedding day?"

"My wedding day?" Yaotian's expression was one of recollection. She laughed shallowly, "How could I forget it? That day, Yaotian was feeling very uneasy and asked Senior Official into the room to have a private conversation with me."

"Princess wondered how it was possible to keep He Xia's heart and told me to think ways to do so." Gui Changqing bowed, "Back then, I promised Princess that I'll put my heart into it."

When Yaotian heard this, her gaze flickered beyond him. She slowly said, "Yet today, why do I feel that every action of Senior Official is to force the Prince Consort's person and heart further and further away from me?"

"Princess..."

"Senior Official doesn't need to say any more." Yaotian interrupted his word. She paused before revealing a solemn expression of determination. "I have already promised the Prince Consort to build a special treasury and granary for the military. This is beneficial to the citizens of this country, so please do not argue any further, Senior Official, and quickly approve of it."

Gui Changqing hesitated as well. Studying Yaotian's expression, he knew that it was impossible to change her mind. He could only lower his head to say, "I...Yes." He sighed.

Gui Changqing had been the official for many years and was considerate. Yaotian had always, since childhood, respected him as an elder. She never dismissed his opinions so abruptly before him. He seemed quite upset. She was silent for a long time before softening her voice, "Is there anything else Senior Official would like to tell me?"

Gui Changqing indeed have something he wanted to say.

"Ahem," said Gui Changqing, "there's something else."

“Hm?”

“I would like to ask Princess to give a person to the Prince Consort.”

Yaotian was slightly stunned. She looked at Gui Changqing, “Who?”

“My newly adopted daughter, Huan Fengyin. Although she isn’t particularly beautiful, she is very gentle and likes to play qin and can sing. She is loyal and dedicated to the Royal House of Yun Chang.”

Yaotian processed what she heard. When she understood, her heart was very uncomfortable. She coldly replied, “Senior Official would like me to send a concubine to the Prince Consort Residence?”

“Yun Chang has prohibitions on expression, as a result Prince Consort and Princess do not live together. There must be at least one concubine in the Prince Consort Residence. After all, the Prince Consort almost raised Bai Pingting to a concubine last time. Now that Bai Pingting is dead, why doesn’t Princess be a little open and give one to Prince Consort?”

Yaotian’s expression was ugly. “Who says that the Prince Consort Residence needs a concubine? I am the Princess. If prohibitions can rise, then so can they fall.”

Gui Changqing smiled, “Princess is wrong. Prohibitions can change, but can people’s hearts change? Rather than letting the Prince Consort choose someone who Princess doesn’t like, it’s better for Princess to choose someone who can help Princess look after Prince Consort. With her there, the Prince Consort can’t easily get another Concubine and, if the Prince Consort’s heart is taken away by someone else, at least there’s someone who can pass on the message.”

The Princess’ chest began to tighten. She shook her head. “No. Others can be discussed but not this.”

Gui Changqing knew now was not the time to press on. He stepped back, “Since it’s like that, I will depart. Please consider it, Princess. It’s not too late to act after careful consideration.” He bowed and left the room.

Yaotian watched the brief dazzle of the curtains. She was the only one left in the room. Her original good mood was completely ruined by Gui Changqing’s various proposals. She couldn’t help hate him secretly.

What reigning back in, when he actually dared to want her to send in another?

She thought of how hateful the Yun Chang laws were. When women marry, of course they should live together with their husband. Yet why was the utterly pitiful Princess had to stay in the Royal Residence? It seemed there were two stars on opposite sides of the silver river. One star was the Royal Residence, the other being the Prince Consort Residence, and the residents could only stay inside, watching the other miserably.

However...

He Xia was strong and handsome. His fame was enough to shake the skies. As a hero, he had had a great number of experiences in the world. Now that he was the Prince Consort, he had more power and fame. Just how many people secretly watched him from the darkness with red cheeks? How could she stop him from two-timing or even three?

What if the Prince Consort really fell in love with someone and begged to establish her as a concubine? People would be interested to see what she, the dignified Princess, would do. If she refused, everyone would be able to ridicule her jealous heart.

Yaotian looked in the mirror, unsatisfied. The jealousy in her eyes reflected in the mirror gave her a fright. She hurriedly fished out a scarf and covered the mirror.

Luyi was outside the curtains. "Princess, the dried flowers have arrived."

Yaotian's mood was irritable and did not want to be disturbed by anyone. She lifted her voice, "Take it away. If there's nothing major, don't report it."

Luyi heard the anger hidden in her voice and jumped back. She lowered her voice, "Yes." She secretly poked out her tongue, not knowing what the Senior Official said that made the Princess so angry.

When she was just about to take away the vase full of dried flowers and leave, she heard another order from Yaotian. "Luyi, just wait there."

Luyi suddenly stopped, relying, "Yes." She waited outside the curtain.

Why did she, as a Princess, have to stay in the Royal Residence? It was so

unfair...

Yaotian thought about Gui Changqing's proposal, carefully pondered it and realised it wasn't unreasonable.

That Fengyin was "not particularly beautiful", so even if the Prince Consort finds her fresh at first, ten days or half a month later, his interest would slowly fade. "Very gentle, likes to play qin and can sing" could only relieve the Prince Consort of his boredom.

As a person the Senior Official found, Yaotian completely trusted in this Fengyin. She would pour tea at one side or sometimes be as close as a pillow to easily monitor the Prince Consort's every action. Secondly, if the Prince Consort really were to be hooked away by another woman, Fengyin could deal with it by screaming and making noise, acting as the difficult corner of connection.

"Indeed, it seems it is not entirely unreasonable." Yaotian murmured to herself, slightly moved. But when she thought of an extra concubine by He Xia's side, her eyebrows furrowed and could feel not one part of her body be comfortable. It was unspeakably suffocating.

Luyi stood outside and heard Yaotian's pacing footsteps. Occasionally she'd bring the gems of the bead curtain to collide fiercely into each other, but not long later, there was no movement again. It was a long gap before she heard a voice from inside, "Luyi."

"Luyi is here, Princess."

"Send someone to the Senior Official and say..." The voice inside stopped again.

Luyi strained her ears and waited for a long time. She puzzledly looked inside the curtains.

Yaotian was standing in the middle of the room. Her back was straightened, and she was as motionless as a statue.

"Princess?" Luyi probed with her question.

Yaotian helplessly sighed. Her face was deathly gray, "Just say, Princess has thought it though so Senior Official can go ahead. The Royal Order will be written

soon and sent to the Prince Consort Residence.”

He Xia’s horse had been galloping nonstop for the entire day. It had not drunk a single drop of water even upon returning to the Prince Consort Residence, as the messenger from the Royal Residence had come to pass on the Royal Order.

He Xia received the Order inside the room, and he asked someone to send off the messenger. Dongzhuo saw there wasn’t any people around and lowered voice, “They still aren’t satisfied with the spies amongst the servants and have to put another by your pillow. I bet it’s handiwork of that Senior Official.”

He Xia held the order, his face ashen and silent.

Not long later, a manservant came to report, “Prince Consort, there is a carriage outside the residence. It seems to be the Miss Fengyin the Princess has given to Prince Consort.”

Anger crossed He Xia’s eyes. He faintly replied, “Understood, I’ll go now.” He strode on the way. The moment he stepped out of the Prince Consort Residence gates, his ashen face had already become a smile.

“Miss Fengyin must be tired.” He Xia personally went forwards, gracefully helping the woman off the carriage.

Fengyin reached the ground, slowly bowing to He Xia. “Prince Consort.” Her voice was timid. She raised her eyes to look at He Xia. They were also shy.

The two entered the residence together. He Xia led her to the rear courtyard, saying as he walked, “The Royal Order only just arrived, so Miss’ room has not been decided yet. Why not go and have some tea in the room. Once dinner is finished, the maids should be finished.”

Fengyin lowered her head. “Fengyin received the Royal Order to serve the Prince Consort. I am merely a servant; there is no need to have a separate room. Prince Consort can give Fengyin any room that previous maids have lived in, any is fine.” She stopped at one which happened to be where Pingting had lived.

Dongzhuo’s expression suddenly changed. He took a few steps forwards but saw a warning glance from He Xia, so he gritted his teeth and withdrew.

He Xia’s voice became gentle, “Since it’s like that, this room is empty indeed. It

might be a little troublesome, but Miss can stay here.”

“Thank you, Prince Consort.” Fengyin gently smiled before she swivelled to He Xia. “Fengyin will now go into the room to tidy her belongings before serving the Prince Consort during dinner.”

“Go ahead.”

He watched her push open the doors and step inside.

He Xia didn’t make a word and turned away. Dongzhuo’s expression was dark as he followed behind. When they passed the fake mountain, they heard the plucking qin sound. It appeared that Fengyin was fiddling with that guqin in the room.

Dongzhuo furiously stopped moving. He grinded his teeth, “Gui Changqing, the old fool who can’t die, went way too far this time! Master, why...” When he raised his head, he realised He Xia was already far away.

When all the snow melted, spring had finally come.

It was finally the season to pick flowers.

Compared to previous years, the circumstances of the four countries had become a completely different situation again.

In the Gui Le Royal Residence, the relationship between the King and the Queen’s family was like a current secretly flowing under ice, whirling out more and more urgently.

The Main General of Bei Mo officially headed to live in seclusion, taking his wife and child away from the old location.

The King of Dong Lin died through despair, lament and disease. Under all of the officials, the Queen of Dong Lin boarded the highest, centermost throne of the state hall.

Accompanied with Bai Pingting’s death was the disappearance of the Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie.

Only one of the two famous generals were left. Only the Marquis of Jing-An, He Xia remained but he didn’t do anything particular.

To dominate the world, one must first revive and prepare.

As a result, the hand that held the sword of Yun Chang's Prince Consort remained calm and composed.

Outside Yun Chang.

Late in the night, the moon shone brightly while the insects crooned softly.

In a small cabin outside the forest, a white-haired, old man was sat cross-legged. His young student respectfully said, "I have something I don't understand and would like Teacher to teach me. Teacher taught in Bei Mo for many years and was beloved there. Why were you determined to leave Bei Mo and come to Yun Chang?"

The old man laughed. "When old, people fear death. The four countries are soon to become a mess. Where else am I to hide apart from the safest place, Yun Chang?"

The student was curious, "How does Teacher know that Yun Chang is the safest place?"

"Haha, the two famous generals under the skies are Chu Beijie and He Xia respectively. Who remains?"

"Chu Beijie's whereabouts is unknown, while He Xia is currently the Prince Consort in Yun Chang's capital."

"How could the Marquess of Jing-An really be satisfied as the Prince Consort?" The old man sighed, "Gui Le has directed their own ruin by forcing out tearing down their safety barrier, the House of Jing-An. Bei Mo has lost Ze Yin while Dong Lin has lost Chu Beijie. Whenever He Xia leads the Yun Chang army out to kill, none of the three countries have good enough generals to oppose He Xia. Where else, apart from Yun Chang, can you hide from the war?"

"Teacher's conclusion has come down too soon."

"Who else could possibly rival He Xia as a general?"

"There's one," said the disciple, "Chu Beijie."

The old man smiled as he looked at him, an insensible and spoiled child. "Where is Chu Beijie now?"

That disciple was plenty stubborn himself. He replied, "As long as he is alive, he remains a famous general and He Xia's opponent."

"So what if he's alive? He is just a walking zombie, so even if he does face He Xia, he will simply give away his life for nothing."

"There is someone who can definitely make him start anew."

"Who?"

"Bai Pingting."

The old man laughed, "And where is Bai Pingting now?"

The disciple was surprised. He lowered her head, "She is dead."

"Correct, she is a dead." The old man stroked his long gray beard and softly sighed.

The disciple still refused to give up. "If Chu Beijie could start anew for a Bai Pingting, why can't he do so for others?"

The old man's gentle gaze rested on the face of his disciple. In the depths of his eyes, its corners were yellowed with age, but the light flickering was the fire of wisdom.

"Have you ever heard of Bai Pingting's qin?"

"I haven't."

"Have you ever met Bai Pingting?"

"I haven't."

"Have you ever seen the letter Bai Pingting handed to the Princess of Yun Chang to pass onto Chu Beijie on the battlefield?"

"I haven't." The disciple had his head lowered as he replied, "I have only heard of her name, as well as what she has done."

Bai Pingting, Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Her name had spread through the world.

And her story was yet finished.

Translation Notes:

- “Silver river”: Allusion to the legend of the Qixi Festival. It’s about two starcrossed lovers that can only be together for a single night every year.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 2 Chapter 54

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol02 Ch54 (Extra)

To understand a man, perhaps a whole lifetime was needed.

But some men, perhaps not even a whole lifetime was enough, was what Zuiju thought.

Fanlu was that kind of hateful guy. He seemed even more watery than girls, by having no fixed state. If you studied him, sometimes his sharp eyes flashed with kind light. The next moment he'd become vicious, like a demon king who was about to eat humans. After a while, a playful smile would suddenly float out again.

That man was wicked man.

He leisurely held his light crossbow as he cornered Zuiju to an edge. Then, for some weird wacky reason, he snatched her away from the sharp teeth and claws of the wolf pack, saving her.

Although he had saved Zuiju's life, he didn't return her freedom.

"If you want to run, I'll hunt you back like a rabbit." When saying this, an evil smile played on the corners of Fanlu's mouth.

Zuiju had glared fiercely at him, secretly vowing to never let him catch her.

This vow was unfulfilled. For the whole year, she didn't even have the chance to run away.

Fanlu was an expert at imprisoning people. He could always see through Zuiju's long-planned escape plans, chuckling at how easy it was to break her beautiful dream.

“Why?” Zuiju asked, unsatisfied.

“You’re not a person of the army. You never learned unarmed combat or how to imprison a captive properly. You haven’t learned how to track down enemies in rural places either.” Fanlu then answered with another question, “How could you possibly escape from my hands?”

“Why are you imprisoning me? Isn’t it better to kill me? I don’t want to live anyway.”

Fanlu replied with another question, “Do you really not want to live?”

Zuiju was stunned.

When she woke from her coma, thinking about Pingting’s situation, she really didn’t want to live any longer.

But now?

If her death goes unnoticed, what would her Teacher do?

She could only lower her yells and coldly harrumph, “Whether I want to die or not, it’s none of your business is it?”

Fanlu was briefly surprised and coldly harrumphed back, “When I decide my answer to that question, maybe living won’t be an option anymore.”

With the privileges as the guard of Qierou City, the prison was more ironclad in many ways, yet Zuiju still persevered in finding ways to escape.

Fanlu finally had enough this time. He grabbed onto her wrists, fiercely pushing her into the wall. “You want to return to Dong Lin this much?”

“Who said I wanted to go to Dong Lin.”

“Then to the Songsen Mountains?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“As expected...” Fanlu held her so that she couldn’t move at all, like usual, but the corners of his mouth lifted this time. A deceptive look surfaced on his face. He slowly drawled, “Bai Pingting was on the Songsen Mountains after all.”

Zuiju was shocked. She sucked her lips tightly and turned away.

Pingting, if Pingting were still on the Songsen Mountains, then maybe...

“You took the luminous jade hairpin to look for helpers right?” Fanlu forcefully twisted her back by the chin, staring deeply into the wobbling light in her eyes. He studied them for a long time and lowered his voice, “It seems that if Bai Pingting didn’t die of cold, then she has died of hunger.”

“Liar! You liar! Liar, liar!” Zuiju immediately screeched at Fanlu, crying, “She must’ve been saved by someone, or maybe she had enough energy and walked down by herself. Maybe she...”

She suddenly stopped talking, shocked as she found herself in Fanlu’s arms. In her whole lifetime, apart from her Teacher, she had never been so close to a man. She felt she was being engulfed by fire as Fanlu hugged her.

Zuiju screamed, abruptly pushing Fanlu away. “Don’t touch me!”

She summoned all of her energy for that one push. Fanlu took two steps back and steadied himself. His expression changed a few times. He turned to leave. Zuiju finally released her held breath, gasping for large gulps of air to enter her lungs.

Fanlu returned later in the evening. He carried Zuiju’s dinner, having one pot of alcohol for himself. Zuiju had her head lowered as she ate. He sat in front of her, not using cups, just pouring the alcohol straight into his mouth. Once all of the alcohol entered his throat, his gaze rested on Zuiju.

His gaze was cold and harsh, his black eyes hiding all sorts of evil intentions. It made everything in the prison seem like a taut string, as if the slightest trigger would induce a terrible incident.

The food seemed to be stuck to Zuiju’s backbone as it went down. She felt like she was facing a wild beast, and when she put down her plate, she quickly retreated to the furthest corner of the bed. However, even if the prison was ten times larger, it was still not enough for her to escape his murderous and savage eyes.

Zuiju didn’t say anything that night. It made him seem even more like an irrational lurking wild beast.

Zuiju had always thought that she encountered the worst already. Now she

finally realised that there were even worse things than waiting.

Fanlu's vicious evil, at first, was nasty and hateful, but the Fanlu now could only make her feel fearful.

Fanlu didn't say a word that night and had almost driven Zuiju crazy with his gaze until he stood up to leave again.

Zuiju watched his back disappear and felt she had survived the impossible. She touched her forehead, drenched in sweat.

Her nightmare had not ended. For ten days consecutively, Fanlu came with alcohol to the prison. Once, he drowsily stumbled his way to the bed, staring at Zuiju with his red eyes. Seeing his huge figure slowly threatening to her, she couldn't help but scream.

The scream brought Fanlu back to his senses.

He shook himself and shook his head as he left.

Zuiju couldn't stand such torture. A woman's nature caused her to understand the what in the coldness of Fanlu's smile meant.

She helplessly looked at the sturdy prison cell. This isolated place was even quieter and apathetic than before.

If it's really...

Then I will die.

Zuiju clenched her fists tightly.

Not knowing how many days she had endured, Fanlu finally stopped drinking.

"Why aren't you trying to escape these days?"

"Hmph."

"Tut tut, I was planning to strip you the next time you racked your brains to form a ridiculous plan. Who knew that you actually listened? What a pity, a pity indeed."

"You..."

It seemed like he was pulling an opera. With just one shake of his body, he'd

become all nonchalant again. Occasionally he'd be a vicious villain or the joker who liked to tease Zuiju.

When he came to bring dinner, he suddenly asked, "Do you want to check out the Songsen Mountains?"

Zuiju looked up in surprise.

Fanlu's expression was so calm it didn't seem to know what it was saying.

"Want to go?"

"Ah?"

"It's fine if you don't." Fanlu turned around.

Zuiju started to shout. "Want! I want to go."

Fanlu's footsteps stopped. His back view was no longer slovenly but dignified.

Zuiju stared at his spine.

Idiot, he's lying to you.

Idiot, he's teasing you, like teasing a little dog in his cage.

"When I've finished arranging city affairs, we'll head out."

Fanlu only said it once, making Zuiju almost think she heard wrong. She stood in the prison, stunned, racking her brains over and over again in disbelief.

Fanlu had already left.

Although Zuiju didn't believe him at first, three days later, they set off on their journey.

Fanlu didn't bring any other companions; the two were alone.

Qierou wasn't particularly close to the Songsen Mountains. When Fanlu brought the comatose Zuiju from the Songsen Mountains to Qierou, it had taken half a month. Now that both were on horse, it would take at least ten days.

Zuiju guessed, "You're afraid I'll leak your secret."

"Hm?"

"You hid the truth from the Senior Official of Yun Chang, falsely reporting

Pingting's death. If I yell a single sentence in a crowd, you're so dead. That's why you don't dare take me to places with people."

Fanlu was lazily leaning against a rock. He coldly said, "I just don't want to be the one to personally cut your neck."

Nevertheless, both people hoped to reach the Songsen Mountains as soon as possible. Fanlu was a city governor, and it was more or less an unauthorised absence.

Zuiju's heart suffered even more each step towards the Songsen Mountains.

Pingting, are you still alive?

I dearly hope I won't find you in that rocky area.

The two people on fast horses, with whips, finally arrived at the foot of the Songsen Mountains.

Fanlu found a bush to hide and secure the horse before taking out a uniquely shaped metal hook from his waist. "I'll let you see how real spies climb mountains."

He had prepared two tools, giving one to Zuiju.

The Songsen Mountains were as familiar as home to Fanlu. He was like an ape in the forest and a wild lion in the grass. Zuiju watched him easily jump over a rocky section and saw that he was deeply versed in poisonous weeds as well as various natural traps.

Back then, she and Pingting had taken several days and nights stumbling at this rocky area with great difficulty. With Fanlu leading the way, they had reached it within a day.

Zuiju was amazed.

"It's here?"

"Yeah."

No rock had changed.

Standing before the rocky area, Zuiju deeply remembered the wind and snow back then.

The wind howling, Pingting's pale face and the green glow of the luminous jade hairpin in the darkness.

"I will hurry to where Yangfeng is and get her to tell him to send his mountaineering experts with ginseng. I'll make some preparations over there, so they're ready when you arrive."

Three days, life or death, only three days.

"Pingting! Pingting!" Zuiju couldn't help shout at the deserted rocky area.

Fanlu stood afar, watching her agitatedly search.

After searching thoroughly, she searched again.

The skies gradually began to darken. Fanlu only slowly walked over when Zuiju's figure became blurry against the rocks.

The exhausted Zuiju finally stopped. She sat down, panting for air. When she heard Fanlu's footsteps, she raised her head, softly saying, "Can't find her, I can't find her." She bursted into tears as she cried in joy, "That's awesome, she isn't here. She must have left, must have left..." She was so happy. She probably went crazy as she wrapped her arms around Fanlu's waist as continued to cry. "She must still be alive. I know she wouldn't die."

When she raised her head, she was met with Fanlu's smile. Fanlu had never responded with such a decent smile and in the single moment of a breath, Zuiju's sanity returned.

This man, this man is...

The smile froze on her face as she lowered it. But very soon, Zuiju was even more stunned to realise that her arms were around Fanlu's waist.

"Ah!" She yelped softly, letting go, unwittingly pushing him away.

Her heart was bouncing about everywhere as if criticising her frivolous madness. She didn't have any courage to see Fanlu who had just been pushed away.

The entire Songsen Mountains seemed to stiffen and become silent.

"Hmph..."

In the silence, Fanlu sneered which was particularly chilling.

The two spent the night in the rocky area.

Perhaps it was because the tip of the Songsen Mountains had never melting snow all year round, Zuiju felt that night was colder than usual. When she woke up early the next morning, she was shocked to bits by Fanlu's gaze.

His gaze was even more profoundly dark than usual. In the Songsen Mountains, he seemed all the more like a wild beast who ate people.

Zuiju followed him silently down the mountain. Fanlu didn't use those weird mountaineering tools again. He just slowly walked through the forest. Zuiju followed behind, increasingly unsettled.

Fanlu's eyes were dangerous.

Now that she knew Pingting was not in the rocky area already, why not take the opportunity to run? Zuiju's heart thumped as she peeked at Fanlu in front.

He focused on moving forwards and had not once looked back to look at Zuiju.

Zuiju cautiously followed him until they reached a bend where she suddenly rushed for the dense forest on one side.

The wind began to howl.

Zuiju didn't dare look back to see. She already knew of Fanlu's terrifying tracking abilities in the mountains. Therefore, she kept on running without stop. The trees in the forest had already grown green leaves, not as empty as they were in winter. However, it felt Zuiju had returned to winter. Her process of desperately running to escape repeated itself.

She ran on crazily, not daring to stop and afraid to look back.

She crossed small patches of rocky areas. Dense bushes and even massive trees in the forest quickly passed her sides.

Her lungs began to burn like fire, leaving burning waves of pain.

She didn't know how long she ran or how far, but she could never support her weight again. Both her knees collapsed. She leaned on a tree, desperately gasping for breath.

“Had enough of running?” said a cold male voice above her head.

Zuiju abruptly raised her head, inhaling the cool air.

Fanlu was leisurely sitting on the tree, his icy cold eyes startling her.

Before Zuiju could take another step, Fanlu turned a somersault as he jumped off the tree, accurately landing in front of her.

“Didn’t I tell you your fate if you tried to escape?” Fanlu sighed, “Why did you still try?”

Zuiju finally registered his words. “You did that on purpose.” She took a step back, both frightened and angry. “You cheater, how dare...ah!”

Fanlu grabbed her, “What cheaters dare do, I dare do.” He opened his fingers.

Rip! He tore a piece of Zuiju’s clothing.

“No! Let go of me, let go of me!”

Rip! Another piece of fabric was torn off.

Zuiju finally understood how terrifying a man’s power was. She began to cry, “I won’t run, just let go of me.”

“It’s too late,” Fanlu pressed on.

“No, no!”

Fanlu’s heavy breath sprayed on her neck. His teeth nibbled her white skin.

“No,” Zuiju helplessly shook her head.

Her delicate shoulders ached from being rubbed against the gravel on the ground. She could see the terrible storm clouds above.

Zuiju desperately raised her head, her body feeling cold as half of her coat had been torn to pieces, scattered in all directions. She only had her single underdress on which was completely unable to protect her.

“I beg you...”

“It’s too late.”

Zuiju closed her eyes in despair.

She felt the weight on her body lift, Fanlu had left instead. Zuiju opened her eyes in surprised, seeing that Fanlu had stood up and had a very alert expression on his face.

“Who’s there?” Fanlu demanded.

“That Missy isn’t too bad.” Shadows began to reveal in groups out of the forest, forming arcs that then surrounded them. The man leading them looked at Zuiju and licked his lips, “Bro, it’s not too fun to eat alone. You can start first, and then let us bros try it too, ok?”

Bandits? Zuiju’s heart began to tighten. She huddled up, hugging her body.

Fanlu silently considered a little and nodded, “Indeed, it’s not fun to eat alone.” While he said this, he took off his own coat. He tossed it beside Zuiju’s foot.

“Hah, guess you’re experienced.”

“But so it happens, I like to eat alone.” Fanlu laughed scornfully.

All of the bandits were stunned.

“What a person who doesn’t fear death.” The boss fiercely beckoned to him with his chin, “My bros, attack!”

Around ten bandits had their knives flashing in the light as they rushed towards him.

Fanlu took out his light crossbow, put two arrows and shot down two with a whoosh.

“Kill him!”

Whoosh, whoosh! Two arrows flew again, but there were too many bandits. They had already forced their way up. Fanlu tossed away the crossbow in his hands and pulled out his sword. It clanged as it collided with his opponent’s knives.

“Ah!” Zuiju yelped somewhere behind. Fanlu turned away and pierced the bandit that had pounced towards Zuiju.

The sound of a sharp sword splitting the air sounded behind, but Fanlu was

already too late by the time he turned back. He felt an immense pain on his right forearm and fresh blood began to drip onto the ground.

Clang! Fanlu swapped his sword onto his left hand, raising his arm to block another hit. He turned back to stare at Zuiju, “Why are you still here?”

Zuiju had already picked up his coat and put it around herself. “I...”

“Scram.” Fanlu coldly said these words. His expression suddenly darkened as the dissonant sound of metal entering flesh came again. His anger came out with the injury. His eyes became red as he shouted, “I’ll fight you to death!”

He blocked the way to Zuiju, refusing to back away. He pressed on instead, stepping forwards several times.

Zuiju took advantage and exhausted all of her energy to run in the direction behind.

She ran back the way she came. The massive trees in the forest quickly passed her sides.

Run, run!

Even without looking back, she already knew she was far away. The sounds of killing became quieter and almost inaudible. This time she didn’t need to worry about Fanlu chasing as he was already soaked in blood and wouldn’t appear like a ghost above her again.

The sound of wind whirled in her ear.

Zuiju ran to a patch of rocky area, hiding herself in a little cave. The rock cave was well-hidden and should be enough to avoid the pursuers behind her, if anyone would anyway.

Huff, huff...

She panted noisily in the tiny space.

Even after a long time passed, her heart did not stop frantically jumping. She felt as if she was freezing, despite her clothing. When she touched it, its rough texture made her understand that it was Fanlu’s coat.

She had escaped, she had really escaped.

She was free.

Zuiju quietly sat in the cave. Her heart felt like it was suspended in air as it anxiously clamoured, unable to relax. She had originally planned to stay the night before leaving as perhaps she could avoid the terrifying bandits then.

How was he? Zuiju stood up. She restrained her emotions and sat back down.

But not long later, she couldn't help but stand up again.

Was he dead?

That hateful guy?

That wicked man?

That shameless despicable cheater...was he dead? He could be killed by the bandits. There were numerous bandits and they could have swarmed around his body until his corpse was all minced up.

This made Zuiju shiver. No, no...no way!

It always seemed that villains could live a thousand years, so someone like him...

She searched for the path she had come from. As she had taken it twice today, she was already a little familiar with it. At first, she was walking hesitantly. For a reason she did not know, she suddenly began to frantically run, even faster than she had during her escape attempts.

Zuiju ran back to the place and suddenly stopped.

Her surroundings were quiet, even the chirping of birds could not be heard. The smell of blood filled this patch of forest and the red on the ground were solidified. Corpses lay everywhere, a mess.

Zuiju approached, mortified, looking for that wicked man's corpse.

No, she didn't hope to find his corpse!

Zuiju desperately crossed those bodies. She had seen fresh blood and corpses all over the ground before. It was even more tragic than this, in the Duke of Zhen-Bei's secluded residence.

But she hadn't been as worried as now.

Is he dead?

Dead?

Her foot hit something. She lowered her head, her tears pouring straight down.

It was the light crossbow, his favourite crossbow to have in his hands and play with.

Zuiju knelt down, picked up the crossbow and stood up again. She stumbled in the clearing as she looked.

Where, where was he?

He couldn't have been captured right? He had killed so many of the bandits. If he were still alive, then the ways he would be tortured were unthinkable. Maybe...

Zuiju suddenly stopped.

The grass half her height appeared to be hiding something. Although Zuiju couldn't see what it was, she rushed forwards as if she did know.

It was a very familiar back lying in the grass.

Zuiju knelt down, reaching out a hand to check his breathing.

Thank god, he was still alive.

"Oi! Oi!" Zuiju flipped him over.

Fanlu's face was full of blood and mud, but he still managed to open his eyes slightly. He feebly scorned, "Stupid thing, why are you still here?"

Zuiju was temporarily stunned. She couldn't help clench her teeth, "You're still alive?"

The corners of Fanlu's lips curved ever so slightly before his head drooped into unconsciousness.

"Oi! Oi! Oi! You hateful guy, don't really die on me!"

Zuiju didn't understand Fanlu, and she didn't understand much about herself either.

Such a great opportunity but she foolishly ran back and dragged this hateful guy ,who refused to die, down the mountain. She could do it with the tool Fanlu lent and taught her how to use. She finally managed to get down the mountain and found the horse they hid.

Fanlu was very injured and very heavy, even heavier than a boar. Zuiju had to pant every step she took while supporting him.

She was anxious to heal Fanlu's injury and even forgot that she ought to send a letter to her Teacher. The only thing that made her feel worthy of her Teacher was that her medical knowledge despite being imprisoned for so long.

She painstakingly put her life out to reach a place where there were people. She took some money out of Fanlu's bag, wrote a prescription and bought the herbs. She soon boiled them and bandaged his wounds until she was exhausted and her muscles ached.

"You're still here?" Fanlu was groggy. It was the first thing he said since opening his eyes.

Zuiju deftly helped him dress his wounds while using the dignified gaze of a doctor to stare at him. "You've lost too much blood, so talk less."

"You're a doctor?"

"Hmph."

Fanlu's eye swere muddled, and he fainted again.

His physique was good, so his wounds healed quickly. It seemed that he didn't have much strength however. He was out cold all day and night, and Zuiju even had to feed his meals to him.

Zuiju was secretly anxious and put in all her effort, hoping that he would get well soon.

That day, when Zuiju brought in the properly boiled medicine, she suddenly discovered he had gotten up already. He was dressed and had his crossbow in his hand, looking utterly healthy and energetic. He looked ready to leave, a complete change from his weak attitude yesterday.

"Let's go."

“Us? Go where?”

“Qierou of course.”

Zuiju understood and screamed. She threw down the medicine bowl to run outside, but Fanlu blocked her from the doorway. Fanlu evilly smirked, “Have you forgotten your fate if you tried to escape again?”

Zuiju huffed, “You cheater! You were better ages ago, yet pretended you couldn’t get off the bed, you...”

“I’m a cheater, and if you provoke me too quick, I’ll cheat a little more.” Fanlu grabbed onto her chin, his fingertips sliding across her red lips.

Zuiju shuddered.

“I saved your life.” She wasn’t satisfied.

“I saved your life too.”

Zuiju was trembling with anger, “I saved your life, but I didn’t lock you up.”

“That’s why,” Fanlu nodded, “I’m a cheater.”

She was caught by Fanlu and returned to Qierou once more.

She remained in the isolated prison and remained seeing that wicked man’s teasing smile every day.

Zuiju didn’t understand.

Didn’t understand that man.

Unless the world were to fall into chaos and Fanlu took her with him to leave, then perhaps she would never be able to leave this place in this lifetime.

Perhaps she would never understand that hateful guy in her lifetime.

Translation Notes:

- “Opera”: Reference to Chinese opera where the artist turns around and shifts through several different masks, each with their own expression. One can be sad while another could be angry or happy.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 55

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch55

The Songsen Mountains were a natural barrier, separating the two countries, Bei Mo and Yun Chang.

The small village was at the foot of the Songsen Mountains. If you were to judge by territory, this place belonged to Bei Mo but was too remote. There's no military use since it was far from any checkpoint. The village residents often went into the more remote parts of the mountains to gather herbs and hunt, not caring about Yun Chang or Bei Mo.

The Songsen Mountains are ours. A-Han would often chuckle as he yelled this.

Gazing far into the distance, he could see the year round gleaming snow. It looked cold and pale in the sunlight, like a diamond. The seed of spring seemed to have been sown in the village, because there was a large grass plain in the east, as if its young grassbuds were joyfully stretching out their arms.

Spring had arrived and shouts of life were everywhere.

"The sheep sure sound happy." A-Han happily rushed outside in the early morning. His voice was unrestrained as always as he cheerfully carried a chicken. "Missus, my family has quite the fat chickens. I'll prepare one for your baby to eat."

Yangfeng walked out from the building, putting a finger to her lips and shook her head. "A-Han, you always forget. You'll wake the sleeping baby again."

A-Han suddenly remembered and sheepishly scratched his head. "Heh, how did I forget again? I often wake my little A-Han too."

Yangfeng took the chicken from his hands, smiling, "Madam Pingting stepped

out, but do come in.”

“And Brother?”

“He left with Weiting for the mountains, said they were going to hunt in exchange for rice and oil.”

Ze Yin and the others came to stay and organised the hunting & herding. Because of A-Han’s acquaintance with Pingting, A-Han often came to visit. His personality was straightforward. It was fortunate he wasn’t nosy to ask their reasons. Seeing Ze Yin’s age, he called him Brother. As for Yangfeng, she was his sister-in-law of course.

“I don’t need a seat. I still have to go see the horses.”

“Ah, don’t leave yet.” Yangfeng stopped him and turned to go into the room. Not long later, she came out holding a small paper bag. “Aren’t there blisters on A-Han’s wife’s hand? Take these herbs and boil them for her to drink.”

Having mentioned his wife’s blisters, he frowned in distress. “Herbs are useless. She has had a lot already, but the swelling remains. It’s so painful she can’t sleep at night.”

“These herbs will be different. Let me tell you, Madam Pingting picked these from the mountains.”

A-Han widened his eyes. “Madam Pingting can treat illnesses?”

“She knows many others too. She isn’t a genius doctor, but she will be much better than that Doctor Lou when it comes to treatment.” Yangfeng stuffed the medicinal bag into A-Han’s hands and reminded him, “It’s enough to be happy when she recovers, but don’t proclaim it everywhere.”

“Understood. Madam Pingting said that many times. I won’t tell anyone! Sister-in-law, I’ll take these herbs. If they really are useful, I will bring another chicken over.” A-Han took the herbs and suddenly turned, slapping his forehead. “Look at me! I’m so stupid! To think I forgot my wife’s instructions.” He took out a bag from his arms. “There are two articles of clothing here, both sewn by my wife. It’s a bit rough, but the material is strong. One is for Aunt’s Qing’er and the other is for Madam Pingting’s baby.”

Yangfeng received the clothing and eyed the smaller one first. A smile lifted in her lips, "It's too small; the shoulder width won't do."

"How long could the shoulder width of such a small thing get?" A-Han was somewhat disappointed, "Try it anyway, maybe it'll fit."

Yangfeng led him into the room with a small wooden cradle. She compared the clothing to the precious baby. Indeed, it was a little too small. "See, the shoulder width isn't enough. It doesn't matter though, I'll just unpick it and fix it with another piece of cloth."

The little baby lied in the cradle, sleeping peacefully. Its face was white and tender, and its nose rose straight. Other babies tend to tussle and turn whiel sleeping but he slept as straight as a pen, tidily.

A-Han studied him carefully, chuckling, "This baby has a nice face. Who knows how many girls he'll swoon when he grows up. Changxiao, long laughter and laughing every single day. Huh, Madam Pingting sure chose an interesting name." Seeing Changxiao sleeping well, he couldn't help reach out to tease him with one finger. Changxiao felt someone touch him in his dreams and unhappily twisted his neck. His eyes did not open while his chubby hand moved, tightly holding onto A-Han's finger.

"Ah, he certainly isn't weak." A-Han smiled in delight, "He will definitely become a great hero in the future."

"Of course." Yangfeng's smile was faint as she lowered her eyes to look tenderly at the sleeping baby.

Changxiao, Chu Changxiao.

His father was the world famous Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Fengyin stayed in the Prince Consort Residence, taking over Pingting's room and Pingting's qin. The people of the Prince Consort Residence knew the Princess and the Senior Official protected her in the shadows and therefore did not dare treat her as a servant.

As long as Yaotian wasn't around, she was naturally the other mistress of the Prince Consort Residence.

“What else?”

“And...” Fengyin frowned as she pondered, “it seems that the Prince Consort has taken in a homeless man, who seems to be from Gui Le.”

“From Gui Le? Who? What’s his name? What’s his origin?”

Fengyin shook her head. “I’ve only vaguely heard them saying it once. I don’t know anything else apart from the fact he is definitely a man of Gui Le.”

Gui Changqing glanced at her in disappointment. He sighed, “The greater power He Xia holds, the more disturbed my heart. It’s a pity that the Princess does not listen to my advice. Fengyin, you must do everything to help your foster parent.”

Fengyin nodded. “Father in law, don’t worry.”

“How does He Xia treat you?”

“He remains very polite to me and also tells the lower servants to attend to me properly.”

“Does he like to listen to you play qin?”

“He never asks me to play qin.”

“When you get back, continue to play qin in that room every day. Your skills at qin are superb and won’t go to waste.”

Fengyin held her words back, carefully raising her eyes to peek at Gui Changqing’s pondering expression. She finally couldn’t help but ask, “Why must I do this? Every time I play qin in my room, the Prince Consort always becomes a man of few words.”

Gui Changqing asked, “Do you know who owned the qin that you’re using now?”

“I know. That qin belongs to Bai Pingting.”

Bai Pingting, still Bai Pingting.

Why did her name remain remembered and longed for despite being long gone herself?

Gui Changqing lightly replied, “That is a prick in his heart. Tug at it periodically

so he will be deeply reminded. This is Yun Chang and the only decision maker should be the Princess. Whoever the Princess wants alive, they will be alive. Whoever the Princess wants gone, they will be gone. This is the code of royalty.”

The military-specific granaries were established under Yaotian’s approval, contributing immensely to He Xia’s power in the government.

The King of Dong Lin had died of illness and the Queen succeeded the throne. The army of Dong Lin lost its Duke of Zhen-Bei and completely rid of its former pride.

He Xia, having been dormant for so long, naturally couldn’t let a great opportunity to pass. With the military advantage of grain and money as well as being in the season abundant of horses and crop, he requested Yaotian to assign troops to him.

“Is that...proper?” Yaotian frowned, putting down the fruit she had picked up to play with again. She looked at He Xia.

He Xia’s handsome features broke into a smile as he returned Yaotian’s gaze, “What part does Princess feel is improper?”

Without waiting for Yaotian’s reply, Gui Changqing who was quietly sitting aside smiled as he said, “My Yun Chang’s national policy has always been about self-sufficiency, no dispute nor attack. Only by looking after the peasants can the country prosper stably.”

Yaotian’s expression revealed her agreement.

He Xia was quiet for a moment before sighing, “This is a major event. No need to make a quick decision. During the assembly tomorrow, Princess can discuss and negotiate with the other officials. Does this sound good?”

Yaotian had been afraid He Xia and Gui Changqing would clash when facing each other. She hurriedly nodded and gazed at Gui Changqing, “What does Senior Official think?”

He Xia’s proposal played Gui Changqing right into his hands. He had the support of numerous civil service officials in court. Gui Changqing had always preferred civil service over military. A few military officials resisted his authority, but none are able to challenge him in court. “Prince Consort is right; this is a

major event that should be discussed with the rest of the officials. Princess should decide after that.”

The matter of war was finally temporarily set aside. The two people discussed a few more national affairs, but each had their own priorities to attend to hence asked Yaotian to retire.

Yaotian watched the two people go into the distance and heaved a sigh of relief. The conflict among the Prince Consort’s and Senior Official’s factions was intensifying in the darkness. It was tense enough to explode at the slightest trigger. They were similar in so many ways, yet together they were troublesome.

She rested a while before hearing the sound of footsteps. They sounded somewhat familiar.

Yaotian raised her head in surprise, “Why did you come back, Prince Consort?”

He Xia smiled softly towards her. He walked to her side until he stood with his shoulder beside hers. His gaze was fixed somewhere beyond the window as he said, “I was originally planning to return to the Prince Consort Residence, but halfway there, I suddenly thought of a few words and couldn’t help walking back to see Princess.”

Yaotian curiously asked, “What important words did Prince Consort think of?”

“In my heart, these words are indeed important.” A tiny smile escaped from He Xia’s lips as if immersed in a happy memory. His tone was a little wistful as he sighed, “It’s a pity Princess has forgotten.”

Yaotian couldn’t help scooting closer and softly say, “How should Yaotian know which words Prince Consort is referring to if he doesn’t say them?”

He Xia was silent for a while before slowly saying, “On our wedding night, I promised Princess that one day I’ll personally crown the Princess as the Queen of the Four Countries.”

Yaotian’s heart was trembling, her voice lost. “Prince Consort...”

“These words were heard and understood, yet why has it come to this?” He Xia looked at Yaotian with a bitter smile, “But if Princess really wants a Prince Consort who sits around and does nothing all day, I’ll definitely won’t disappoint

Princess.”

“Prince Consort...”

He Xia’s eyes were like stars as he calmly said, “That was all I came here to say. Princess is the sole master of the country so Princess should make the decisions about major affairs of Yun Chang by herself.” He bowed politely to the Princess before then casually striding off.

That night, Gui Changqing wrote twenty-seven personally written letters to be delivered to the governing offices of various cities. They planned to speak out against He Xia’s military plan in court.”

He hadn’t expected seeing Yaotian arrive, seat herself on the throne, and announce her Order with great authority. “Dong Lin is my country’s greatest enemy. Since the enemy is weak, we must take opportunity and attack before Dong Lin has enough time to breathe. Prince Consort.”

“Here.” He Xia’s voice was clear as he stepped out.

“For Yun Chang’s peace in the future, I, the Princess, commands you to lead the troops to crush Dong Lin. Effective immediately, the rights to command three of Yun Chang’s regiments fully belongs to you.”

The officials who had long prepared a bellyful of good reasons to refuse hadn’t expected Yaotian making an Order first thing that morning. Their expressions instantly turned surprise. Every one of them stared at Gui Changqing.

Gui Changqing paled to purple. Just when he was about to step out of line to talk, he heard Yaotian’s cool voice again, “It hasn’t been long since Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen Bei led troops to invade my Yun Chang. If all we do is seek security, we may not be able to keep the peasants safe. Officials, don’t forget to learn from our past mistakes.”

This point was spoken resolutely and decisively. Everyone understood Yaotian’s determination. The inside of Gui Changqing’s heart went cold and could never take that one step he had planned. He ground his teeth as he looked at He Xia receive the flag of command. Everyone knew the affair’s conclusion had been set and was irreversible.

When the assembly finished, He Xia and a crowd of generals briskly strode

away from the hall, hungrily longing for war. The civil service officials filled in the gaps of a circle around Gui Changqing, their expressions very upset.

“Senior Official, you see...”

“Senior Official, such an important affair of sending troops should not be executed so sloppily.”

“Senior Official, should you not enter the Royal Residence and discuss with Princess herself?”

Gui Changqing shook his head, not saying anything. Without caring for the surrounding crowd, he got on the carriage alone. He returned to the Senior Official Residence and his younger son, Gui Yan, hurriedly came to the door to beckon him into the room. Once he had closed the door, he asked, “Father, did the Princess really make her Order, allowing the Prince Consort to lead troops to attack Dong Lin?”

Gui Changqing’s face was gloomy. He nodded and glanced at his younger son. “He Xia formally took the flag of command and can mobilise all of Yun Chang’s army, including the Yongxiao Regiment under your command and the Weibei Regiment under your second uncle’s command.”

The two were silent when the sounds of heavy footsteps were suddenly heard out of the room. They were clearly impatient.

Gui Changqing said, “Must be your second uncle.”

He had yet to finish his sentence when the door to the room opened. The tall figure blocked more than half of the sunlight in the room. Gui Changning stumbled forwards and raised his voice, “Brother, I heard the Princess has given her order, allowing He Xia to lead troops to attack Dong Lin?”

Gui Changqing nodded, his face very grave.

Gui Changning’s expression revealed joy instead. He laughed, “Finally attacking Dong Lin, how refreshing! It’s a pity that I went out to train the soldiers and only returned to the capital just now, missing the scene when the Princess made her Order.”

For generations, the Gui family were important officials of Yun Chang. In this

generation, Gui Changqing was in charge. He had recommended many civil service officials but only recommended two military officials in contrast. They were respectively his second younger brother, Gui Changning, and his younger son, Gui Yan. Gui Changqing understood his brother's personality and warned him with a glance. He sighed, "What good can war do? He Xia already secretly loathes us but can't do much about me during assemblies. I'm afraid he now has full control. He will mobilise your two regiments to the very front..."

"I'm only afraid that he won't mobilise me. How could I be afraid when I have a few techniques in defeating the enemy?"

Although Gui Yan was a military official, his thoughts about people were much deeper than his second uncle. He contemplated for a moment before saying, "Father is afraid that now He Xia has power in his hands, mishap might happen to Second Uncle at the frontlines. It is true a single arm cannot defend against four fists. Why not do this, if He Xia does mobilise Second Uncle's Weibei Regiment to the frontlines, I too will ask for Yongxiao Regiment's mobilisation. He Xia can't do anything to the uncle and nephew that lead two major regiments unless he dares command the other regiments to surround and siege us."

"No, that's far too dangerous. What if..."

Gui Changning sneezed and waved his hand. "Brother, don't worry. I reckon the most dangerous thing that could happen is not to mobilise our troops. He'll take the troops, destroy Dong Lin, and return with all the glory. Our Gui family can only stand aside, watching."

He had a straightforward personality and his words certainly weren't wrong.

Gui Changqing studied the two. Gui Yan lightly nodded his head, apparently agreeing with his second uncle's perspective. Gui Changqing thought for a while and sighed, "Since it's like that, all we can do is cross the bridge when we get there. To be honest, it's no good if we aren't able to communicate with the generals in the army with He Xia's expedition. However, my younger brother," he turned to look at Gui Changning, his expression very serious, "As your older brother, I tell you that this expedition is different from previous times. During the outing, you must not..."

"Drink alcohol right." Gui Changning's bushy eyebrows frowned once and he

gritted his teeth, “I won’t touch alcohol at all during this expedition. If I do, I won’t be a son of the Gui family.”

“You must remember it. Don’t drop your guard and lapse into your old habit again.”

Gui Changning thumped his chest. “Brother, don’t worry. I won’t mess up on the important things, even though I’m sloppy on the details.”

Gui Changqing cherished his clever younger son, yet he refused to be a civil service official but had to lead troops. Gui Changqing gently looked at him and sighed, “At the frontlines, don’t be blinded by victory and jump into battle at any given chance.”

Military officials were different from civil service officials. They were generals who fought on the battlefield and weren’t decided by family backgrounds or qualifications, only those with skill were admired. Annoyingly, He Xia’s combat and strategic skills were superior and won the majority of the army general’s loyalty in a short period of time. Otherwise, what had the Gui family had to worry about it, being so entrenched in Yun Chang’s powers?

Gui Changqing’s heart was miserable. He got up and opened the room’s door, allowing a breeze to waft in. A trusted manservant stood at the other end of the corridor who Gui Changqing beckoned to. “Has the Princess sent anyone to summon me?”

The manservant peeked at him and cautiously answered, “No.”

Gui Changqing’s expression became even more sour as he stood outside the door for a few moments. He instructed, “You may leave. Immediately notify me whenever there’s news from the Royal Residence.”

The battle horses had been fattened and the war drums would soon thud.

He Xia had full control of the army in his hands. He had the flag of command, grain and money with no restrictions by the government.

Dear Princess, are you really betting on Yun Chang’s future with this?

With the flag in He Xia’s hand, he mobilised the army the very next day. He understood that despite losing the Duke of Zhen-Bei, the Dong Lin army the

Duke of Zhen-Bei finely tuned should still not be underestimated. He Xia's bold spirit seemed ready to mock the heavens as he mobilised all of Yun Chang's seven regiments, Gui Changning's Weibei Regiment and Gui Yan's Yongxiao Regiment included amongst them.

An auspicious day was chosen and the Princess personally sent off the Prince Consort from the capital gates.

Yun Chang's peasants were gathered at the base of the city wall, eyeing the Prince Consort's silver-white armour above. His appearance was like a general from the heavens in the mortal world. Everyone was full of praise.

"Look at how mighty our Prince Consort is!"

"Dong Lin will know our Yun Chang is not to be trifled with."

"Beat them to pieces so the world will know our Yun Chang is not to be bullied!"

A year earlier they had been pressured by the furious Dong Lin army to the point of being unable to lift their heads. Today they were finally able to express all their anger.

Even Yaotian, the one who had decided to mobilise the troops, hadn't expected the peasants who had been living peacefully up til now to be so supportive of this expedition.

Yaotian blessed He Xia with a cup of wine and scanned the tightly-packed crowd below her. She softly said, "All the peasants know Prince Consort will return in triumph."

He Xia laughed as he asked, "Then what about Princess?"

Yaotian looked at He Xia, "No matter what happens in the battle, Prince Consort must come home safely."

He Xia studied Yaotian, his eyes as bright as the stars in the night sky. It was almost too difficult for people to look directly into. He Xia didn't reply but gave Yaotian a confident smile as he turned to unsheathe his sword.

Clang!

The sword had been tempered numerous times came out of its scabbard,

glinting fiercely as it arrived into the sunlight. The reflections of dazzling light shot out, causing momentary blindness to the crowd of peasants. In their dimness, all they could see was He Xia's standing figure bathed in light, daring and arrogant.

"Long live the Prince Consort!" After a few moments of silence, a huge roar erupted. It instantly spread to everyone.

"Long live the Prince Consort! Long live the Prince Consort!"

"Long live the Prince Consort!"

From the neat rows of standing troops to the howling peasants below the city walls, none were silent.

He Xia tossed his head back and laughed for a long time, his handsome figure displaying a greater hint of arrogance. He sheathed his sword, went down the city wall and got onto his battle horse. He rode once around the army, causing everyone to see his figure. When he raised his hand, his audience silenced immediately.

He was no longer the Prince Consort nor the Marquess of Jing-An.

He had become Yun Chang's powerful hope and symbolised the spread of royal values.

He Xia's eyes slowly swept across the huge army that was about to conquer the world with him. The corners of his mouth lifted into the slightest smile as he shouted, "Depart!"

Just a single word set the entire army of a hundred thousand in motion.

The sound of hooves thundered, kicking up a dust cloud so thick that the humans within could not be seen.

Yaotian watched He Xia leave in high morale, her hands pressed at her heart as if feeling empty. She stared until He Xia's back view disappeared into the distance.

The capital was left far behind, only the endless yellow-mud plains stretched before their eyes. He Xia rode at the very front of the huge army when he heard hurried hooves from behind. Dongzhuo rushed forwards, staying closely beside

him as he lowered his voice to report, “Everything Master instructed has been prepared.”

He Xia didn’t turn his horse nor did his eyes leave the distance. He nodded slightly.

“Dongzhuo, clench tightly onto the sword in your hand.” He Xia turned his head, glanced at the magnificent army. A trace of cold laughter flashed in his eyes. “We really will see blood this time.”

Dongzhuo turned back as well, glancing at the “Weibei” and “Yongxiao” flags fluttering high in the sky. His hand on the sword hilt couldn’t help tighten once.

He was familiar with his Master’s tactics. When he wasn’t attacking, he was completely uninvolved, but when he did, he struck like thunder, not leaving any room to spare.

That was the Marquess of Jing-An’s true character.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 56

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch56

When horses were fattened, sheep flocks were also doing well. The rainwater this year was decent, and the grass on the plains grew non-stop. The sheep, cattle and horses did not lack food so herding was comfortably done, as any random place would do.

Ze Yin was a man who had led armies to war so he was both strong and unafraid of hardship. He led Weiting grow food and look after the livestock, while Yangfeng weaved some cloth during her free time. They were self-sufficient and life was laid-back.

“Changxiao can walk now.”

“Walk? I reckon he could run the moment his feet hit the ground. He’s always wriggling; you have no idea how hard it is to catch him.”

Pingting had given this child the right name as he indeed liked to laugh.

Yangfeng was delighted at the sight of him every time. “He’s always in a jolly good mood, I wonder what he’s laughing about?”

Pingting scooped tottering Changxiao and pointed at his nose, blaming, “Geez, your walking is unsteady enough; no need to run. How many times do you need to fall to feel pain?”

Ze Qing tugged at the corners of Pingting’s clothing. “Carry.”

Yangfeng hurriedly pulled her son to one side, holding back her laughter. “You’re still young and shouldn’t haul Changxiao at your pace. What if you drop him?” She shook her head before looking at Pingting. “I reckon you ought to let

Changxiao and Qing'er become brothers. He truly loves to stick to Changxiao."

"Why bother? They're always together and look like actual brothers to anyone."

"How could they possibly look like actual brothers? Qing'er looks plain silly while Changxiao was born with a hint of dominance. Look at those eyes and that nose; he's literally a tiny..." The title, the Duke of Zhen-Bei was stuck in Yangfeng's throat, leaving her sentence suddenly cut by a lack of voice. She knew she had said the wrong thing. Her heart was uneasy as she raised her eyes to look at Pingting.

Pingting had been teasing her son when her face had paled. It was a long time before she smiled bitterly, "Not just his eyes and nose, but his expression too." She poked at her son's tender nose, unsatisfied as she whispered, "What's wrong with looking like Mother? Why must you look like that person?"

My son, do you know of the Duke of Zhen-Bei?

The Duke of Zhen-Bei's name is Chu Beijie.

He could wield a heavy sword, capture the enemy general's head from the middle of thousands of soldiers, and held the power and influence to conquer the world. Those will ill intentions would shiver in his presence.

He was intelligent, courageous, and dauntless -an unchallenged famous general on the battlefields.

He should be in the Dong Lin Royal Residence, right? When autumn passed and the days of winter arrived, there would be a grand celebration in honour of his birth.

The sixth, I remember.

His birthday was the sixth.

Yun Chang's army was threatening Dong Lin's borders, jolting the Dong Lin Royal House awake from the peaceful dreams, realising how insecure Dong Lin was without Chu Beijie. The Queen of Chu Beijie immediately retrieved the flag of command and commanded Chen Mu to lead the army opposing He Xia.

But the enemy general leading the troops to attack was He Xia. Whether it was

the Queen of Dong Lin or Chen Mu in charge, both knew that it was a war with no hope.

When He Xia arrived at Dong Lin's borders, he immediately summoned all of the major generals and threw out their first task.

"The report of returning spies mention that enemy advisor Chen Mu is now on his way and Dong Lin's reinforcements will soon arrive here. My army must hold its ground. First conquer Yan Lin City. Which one amongst you will be willing to gain this first victory?" When He Xia finished speaking, he smiled as he scanned the familiar military generals around him.

Military generals fought for reward, so who didn't want the first victory? Several of the younger officials seemed eager, but Gui Yan opened his mouth the quickest and stood out from the row to speak, "Gui Yan is willing to help Prince Consort capture Yan Lin City."

He Xia seemed to have long expected that he would be the one. He listened with his head slightly inclined before gently asking, "Does Junior General Gui know who is currently guarding Yan Lin City?"

"Yes, it's one of Chu Beijie's ex-subordinates, Luoshang."

"Yes." He Xia nodded briskly, his expression inscrutable. "Luoshang is a mighty general fully tuned by Chu Beijie. He's a very fierce defender and has a significant amount of troops himself. Junior General Gui's Yongxiao Regiment may not be able to capture Yan Lin City. Sending out the Weibei Regiment alongside might be good too..."

"No need." Gui Yan flatly refused, his voice quite proud. "I have already sent mines to confirm the enemy's status. The Yongxiao army is twice more than the defending troops at Yan Lin City, enough for a siege. He's merely just a Luoshang, not a Chu Beijie, so what need is there for my second uncle to attack?"

Gui Changning deliberately agreed with a few grunts before raising his coarse voice to speak. "Such overkill, like killing chicken with a cattle gun. There's no need for two of my Yun Chang's regiments to attack a tiny city like that, otherwise the army of Dong Lin will mock Prince Consort."

He Xia saw the uncle and nephew echoed each other but didn't appear angry. He only agreed, "Fine then. I'll just wait to celebrate for Junior General's good news."

Gui Yan gained a chance of meritorious service. He remembered his father's repeated warnings and couldn't help be a little more suspicious. He submissively gestured and said, "Prince Consort, before I lead the army to attack the city, I have a small request."

He Xia asked, "What request?"

"In the case that something unexpected happens and reinforcements needs to be sent from the main camp, please let my second uncle lead them, Prince Consort."

He was young and fit so his request was full of meaning. With this, he was obviously worried that the main advisor He Xia was planning to harm him and did not trust the other generals either.

The rest of the generals had long been impressed by He Xia's famous demeanour and were not particularly pleased towards the Gui family that opposed He Xia at any chance in the courts. Listening to this, each and every eye narrowed in study at Gui Yan, a person who had shot up to the rank of a Junior General thanks to his family.

He Xia's broad-mindedness was unexpected by all. He pondered and said, "Such a small request, I'll promise you that much."

Gui Yan easily received He Xia's promise and couldn't help feel a little bewildered. When the rest of the generals finished discussing military affairs, each scattered. Gui Yan and Gui Changning left together. Gui Changning mused while walking, "I didn't expect him to be so easy to talk to. No, to such a tiny city like Yan Lin... the Yongxiao regiment is more than enough. What need is there for reinforcements? All he's done is make us owe him a favour. Yan'er, you better put on a good show for everyone to see and bring glory to our Gui family for once."

"Of course." Gui Yan chuckled. After thinking for a moment, his expression changed to stern. "I'm not afraid of ten thousand, just afraid of a single if. Second Uncle, I will lead the troops away, but you must be more careful back

here. You mustn't..."

"Drink alcohol right." Gui Changning angrily looked at him, "Am I that untrustworthy? I promised your father that I wouldn't drink alcohol and drag everyone down. Don't worry!"

The next day, when the sky had yet to lighten, Gui Yan led the army under his jurisdiction, the Yongxiao Regiment, towards Yan Lin City.

Gui Changning was rather worried as they were family after all. He personally sent him out from the main camp. He lowered his voice, "Luoshang is a person who trained under Chu Beijie. In case of an abnormal situation, don't try to be brave and immediately send a messenger to report to me."

Gui Yan nodded, a confident smile appearing on his young face. "And when successful, I'll immediately send a messenger to report to Second Uncle too."

Gui Changning laughed. "Go, I'll be waiting for your good news."

Before dawn, the sky was darker than night. Gui Changning watched Gui Yan and his horse disappear before making back to the camp.

The camp's several other unrelated regiments were still at rest while a few tiny squads were on patrol.

Gui Changning thought there wasn't much else important today apart from waiting for the news from Yan Lin City, so he went back to catch up on some sleep. On the way back, he took a path through the barracks of his trusted troops until he stepped into his army tent, casually tossing his heavy armour onto the bed before opening his mouth to yawn.

A hand came from behind, silently and suddenly covering his mouth.

"Mmfmm..."

Gui Changning widened his eyes. He too could be considered a seasoned veteran of the battlefield. He stretched a hand to touch his waist. He had yet to touch his sword's hilt when the back of his head was thumped once. The culprit had knocked his head hard and he was quite strong, causing Gui Changning to jolt twice before collapsing onto the ground, unconscious.

Once he had fallen, the attacker revealed himself. He was dressed in black, his

face covered with black cloth, only revealing a pair of eyes flickering in the dimly lit military tent. He studied the collapsed Gui Changning on the ground, his eyes unmistakably revealing disdain. He checked Gui Changning's breathing before pulling out a few bottles of decently aged wine Gui Changning had carefully hidden. After taking out a bag of sedatives from his sleeve, he poured it into the wine bottle and shook it, letting the sedatives mix into the alcohol.

"This cup is dedicated to your brother, Yun Chang's Sir Senior Official." The culprit murmured this. His voice was crisp and apparently He Xia, the highest ranked advisor in the camp controlling three regiments.

He Xia helped the unconscious Gui Changqing up, tilted the bottle and forcefully pried his mouth open. He detested the Gui to no end and showed no mercy by filling Gui Changqing with around nine bottles before putting him back on the bed and leaving in a waltz.

Bada, bada, bada bump!

"Please send reinforcements!"

By noon, a fast horse galloped inside from outside the camp. The rider was wearing Yun Chang's military uniform and drenched in blood. When he reached the camp entrance, he raised his head and howled, "Please send reinforcements! General Gui Yan pleads for reinforcements! Pass...the message on quick..."

The guarding tent all knew that he was one of Gui Yan's trusted guards and were surprised. They hurriedly opening the entrance to let him through.

When the rest of the generals heard the news, they all hurried to the advisory tent.

"Please send reinforcements! Please send reinforcements!" The manservant entasked with the message hurled inside. He fell with a thud the moment he entered, breathing heavily as he reported.

"Prince Consort, my army was ambushed by the Dong Lin army outside Yan Lin city. The situation is critical; Can Prince Consort send in reinforcements!"

He Xia guessed that much ages ago, yet his face revealed surprise. He took two steps forward, urging the manservant with his question, "How could this be?"

“It’s an ambush! General Gui Yan had only just led us nearby Yan Lin City when two sets of Dong Lin troops charged toward us in unison, causing my army to be attacked from both the front and rear.”

“Ambush? Whose troops?”

“The ambushing troops were led by Chu Mo Rang.”

“What is the current situation of the battle?”

“Dong Lin had set up landmines and has more people than my side. My army wasn’t able to counter fast enough, so casualties are dangerously numerous. General Gui led us and fought a bloody battle to a temporary standstill, retreating with our remaining brothers to Heng Lian Mountain’s valley. Right now they are fiercely defending the valley’s mouth. General ordered me to fight my way through to bring back the message. Prince Consort, the enemy is pressing on and our brothers can’t put up against them for long so please send in reinforcements!”

Now that the first troops sent against Dong Lin ended in ambush, all of Yun Chang’s generals looked very grim.

“Immediately send reinforcements!” He Xia cut the tension right there and scanned the people in the tent, “Hm? Where is General Gui Changning?”

Quite a few generals already noticed Gui Changning was absent. Now that He Xia asked, they beckoned the soldiers to look for him. A general asked, “Why hasn’t General Gui Changning come yet?”

A soldier who just came from General Gui Changning’s tent replied, “General Gui is dead drunk and won’t wake no matter how much I call.”

Gui Changning was an alcoholic and notoriously famous in the army for that. Listening to the soldier’s words made the crowd frown.

“Let’s go see.”

He Xia led the crowd of generals to General Gui Changning’s tent. When he pushed open the cloth door, a huge whiff of alcohol was caught in their nose.

They saw bottles here and there, all of which were empty. Gui Changning’s body was enveloped in the scent of alcohol. His limbs were sprawled over the

bed, his snores like thunder.

The manservants beside him were drenched in cold sweat and constantly used white cloth to wipe his square face. Their voices were anxious, “General, General, wake up! General Gui Yan needs reinforcements!”

He Xia lowered his voice, “I promised General Gui Yan if he needed reinforcements, only General Gui Changning could lead them. What shall we do?” He commanded Gui Changning’s man servants, “Hurry up, splash him with cold water and use any plan possible to wake him!”

The servants understood the situation was dire too. They hurriedly brought the water and splashed, wetting Gui Changning’s head and face.

But how could Gui Changning possibly wake up, being an old alcoholic forced to drink so much in addition to sedatives? His snoring continued.

The messenger who desperately fought his way out to pass the message had been a close confidant of Gui Yan from childhood. He secretly blamed his generals’ second uncle for being a disappointing man and threw himself at He Xia’s feet. He begged, “Prince Consort, there isn’t time to spare. Please send another general then!”

He Xia’s handsome face also revealed a trace of anxiety but continued to shake his head. “A gentlemen’s promise should always be kept, not to mention a main advisor? General Gui Yan was intelligent enough to think in case of trouble and requested only General Gui Changning could lead reinforcements. He must have his own reasons for doing so. Since I’ve agreed, I can’t take it back.”

The anxious servant was almost in tears. He turned to the bed and forgot all social conventions associated with hierarchy, slapping Gui Changning’s left and right cheeks several times. He howled, “Wake up! Wake up! My god, do you really want my Junior General’s life?”

Gui Changning received several blows but he remained asleep although the snoring stopped.

None of the generals ever had a good opinion of Gui Changning. Everyone suspected his high rank as a general was only thanks to his prolific family. Seeing him like this made them disapprove of him even more.

That servant could no longer do anything about Gui Changqing and was in full despair. He knelt before He Xia's feet once more, each kowtow booming, booming, against the floor. "Prince Consort, Prince Consort, my general's life lies in your hands. Prince Consort, I beg you, please send reinforcements!" He then turned towards the other generals, "All generals, I beg you. At the valley's mouth, Dong Lin's arrows are coming down like rain. All of them are Yun Chang's brothers. Generals, I beg you to take pity and convince Prince Consort to..."

This man forced his way out. His body was covered by blood-stained dust. With such a hard kowtow, blood flowed to every corner of his face, causing him to look very frightening indeed.

All the generals had been toughened up by war. Although they were rather contempt towards Gui Changning, they couldn't help feel respect for this mere servant.

He Xia saw all of the general's gazes on him and knew the battles in the future were to be done with them. He couldn't afford to refuse too bluntly. He considered the group's opinions once more and didn't wait for someone else to start talking when he whispered his question, "Which general is willing to go out and rescue them?"

Everyone exchanged looks and soon after, General Qing Tian of the Shuitai Regiment, stepped out. "I'm willing."

"Fine, then General Qi should immediately lead troops out to rescue General Gui Yan."

Rescuing was as finicky as putting out fires. A lot of time was already wasted from attempting to wake Gui Changning from the alcohol. Qing Tian obeyed orders and immediately left to prepare his troops.

A little under half an hour, Shuitai Regiment departed. A soldier came into the advisory tent to report, "Prince Consort, General Gui Changning has finally woke up."

He Xia and several worried Yun Chang Juniors were still discussing military affairs. When He Xia heard the report, he replied coldly, "Do tie him up for me."

A few of his close confidants immediately went into Gui Changning's tent. They

grabbed the general who had just woken up and viciously tied him up. They had been instructed by He Xia beforehand to firmly gag him with coarse cloth, so that he wouldn't lower the army's morale with his screams.

Gui Changning's own confidants all knew what was happening. They knew the Prince Consort was furious and didn't dare to stop him. They simply weren't shameful enough to do that, so they just watched their general be tied up in silence.

In the afternoon Qing Tian returned, covered in dust.

He returned with Gui Yan's tattered body as he reported his status to He Xia. "I went a step too late. By the time we arrived, the Dong Lin army already retreated and the Yongxiao Regiment annihilated. General Gui Yan died on the spot."

A dozen arrows stood out from Gui Yan's corpse. It looked so terrible that even the witnesses in the battle couldn't bear imagine how devastatingly fierce it was.

"If he listened...If the Yongxiao and Weibei Regiments went together, this couldn't've happened..."

He Xia was painfully silent for a few moments before he began to rage, "This first confrontation caused the annihilation of one of my army's seven regiments. How am I to explain this to Princess? Someone, bring Gui Changning!"

Gui Changning was pushed in, tied up and gagged. He had been tied up the moment he woke up and he had absolutely no clue of what had happened. At first he had planned to seethe his bubbling anger out at He Xia, but he didn't expect the cloudy, dark atmosphere in the advisory tent. Everyone's expression were more twisted than ever. The scent of blood hung in the air. A corpse was placed on the floor. It was wearing a blood-soaked uniform of the Yun Chang army.

Upon closer inspection, his head seemed to buzz hard, driving him senseless.

"Gui Changning, as an important general of Yun Chang, in charge of the Weibei Regiment, what do you have to say about ignoring military orders and drinking till drunk in your tent, delaying rescue squads that caused the entire Yongxiao Regiment to be annihilated?"

He Xia gestured. His soldiers took out the gag from Gui Changqing's mouth. Gui Changqing stared at his nephew who was still alive and kicking just a moment ago. The world in his eyes began to spin. He felt like lightning repeatedly striking his head. He gaped, whispering, "How...how did this..."

He Xia shouted, "Gui Changning, do you admit your crimes?"

Gui Changning's whole body shook and abruptly raised his head. "No, I didn't drink, I didn't drink alcohol! I'm innocent!"

The other generals had personally seen him sleeping on the bed with the strong scent of alcohol. Seeing him deny reality on the spot made them feel deeper contempt. Their eyes couldn't help show disdain.

"How dare you deny it? With such an incident, I dare not see Princess unless you are killed. Someone! Execute him!"

Gui Changning saw the situation and realised that it was dire. He yelled, "I'm innocent, I didn't drink! My Gui family has been important officials of Yun Chang generation after generation. The accomplishments for Yun Chang are numerous. He Xia, you can't kill me! I'll confront you in front of the Princess!"

"In front of the military flag, as well as the commander of three regiments, isn't good enough to kill you?" He Xia laughed coldly. He raised his voice once more, "Someone, take him away."

His soldiers had prepared to do so already. They took out the wrapped up rice parcel-like Gui Changning. Not long later, a rather angry looking Gui Changning head was raised.

There was a general who asked, "The battle of Yan Lin City has ended in defeat, one of Yun Chang's seven regiments is gone too. How does Prince Consort plan to attack the Dong Lin army from now on?"

"We won't attack the Dong Lin army."

"Prince Consort means..."

"We're going back to the capital."

The generals were all stunned, but Dongzhuo already knew He Xia had other plans before them all so he simply stood with his hands at his side. His expression

was like usual.

“Now that one of the seven regiments has fallen thanks to Yun Chang’s internal conflict rather than the Dong Lin army’s strength, doesn’t this suggest now is not the time to attack foreign soldiers?” He Xia continued, “A mere Dong Lin is nothing to me. Everyone here is full of ambition. I wonder if you are willing to accompany me to tidy up internal conflicts first before sending troops out to conquer the world.”

The people were all intelligent and immediately understood what He Xia was planning. Everyone knew He Xia had been the Prince Consort for a while, yet the Gui family had done everything to oppress him. Now that such a huge incident occurred, cleaning up the Gui family was a given.

The tent was silent.

He Xia smiled, “Don’t worry. If you have anything you wish to discuss, feel free to say it.”

This single plan eradicated the military power of the Gui family. Now he rode on its momentum. His eyes were solemn and humble as he gazed around, sending everyone’s heart thumping.

“Wasting sweat or blood is no matter. We generals are just afraid that we stand around idly. Locking us up in a town with nothing to do is fine. Prince Consort can decide everything else.” Qing Tian pondered for a moment before summoning up his courage to speak first.

His thoughts coincided with the other generals’.

The Prince Consort was obviously planning on putting the Gui family back in place, but what had it to do with them? The generals were simply afraid that there wouldn’t be war, the scent of blood. Gui Changqing always nags with his prudent policies that always clashed with the military side. If Prince Consort, an acclaimed general, was completely in charge, it would be a good thing for the army.

The crowd exchanged looks and made their decisions before showing submission to He Xia. In unison, they said, “We will all listen to Prince Consort!”

“Good.” He Xia nodded reservedly, “Then generals, let’s immediately depart

and return with me to the capital.”

Yun Chang, Qierou City.

It was the season of willows but the season had nothing to do with the room. Whether it was winter or summer, all that could be seen were four walls and a window.

The lock device began to clang, and the figure walking inside was still Fanlu.

“Why aren’t you eating again?”

“Don’t feel like it.” Dishes had been placed tidily on the table, but it seemed completely untouched. Zuiju was sitting on the bed, her head lowered to tidy the clothes on her lap.

Fanlu hesitated and then whispered, “Never mind then.”

He let the matter go so easily, causing Zuiju to be surprised. This man treated her like a pig-keeping her locked up in a pen and feeding her food without end. If she didn’t finish her food, numerous things would happen until she was forced to eat everything. Why did his personality suddenly change?

“Hey...”

Fanlu stopped. “What?”

Zuiju walked over, assessing him with a glare. “What happened?”

“It’s none of your business.” This was what Zuiju always said when angry, but Fanlu countered her with it.

Zuiju was surprised for a moment. Then she harrumphed, “Trying to act cool? I won’t ask then.” She went back to sit on the bed and continued to tidy up her clothing while asking, “Hey, even if you don’t dare release me, at least let me write a letter to my Teacher. You could say I’m begging you here, but don’t forget, I saved your life.” Hearing a sudden clang, Zuiju abruptly raised her head to find that Fanlu had already left. The door was locked once more. Zuiju was furious, “That bastard, there’ll be a day when I’ll applaud at the wolves who eat him.”

Zuiju went back to tidying her clothes, putting them into the cabinet.

The imprisoning room wasn't entirely unchanged. The bed cover sets were occasionally changed. All of the patterns were chosen by Fanlu. They were fairly good. A few months ago, Fanlu carried in a cabinet for clothes. Following that, a dressing table, jewelry boxes, rouge and other makeup liquids and powders were collected.

With a hanging mantle, wind chimes, bronze mirrors, green screens, and silk quilts, it was a lady's bedroom except for the metal chains and lock on the door.

That man came and went, leaving behind a little something every time. He never gave them directly to Zuiju, he just mocked her a few times until she was furious. She'd only notice a silver hairpin on the table or a doll by the wash basin when his back view had disappeared out the door.

She'd been locked up for ages now and sick of it. She was dying to see living beings everyday, even if they were an evil person like Fanlu. In the last two days however, Fanlu hurriedly came and went, leaving once food had been served. Zuiju had no idea what was going on and couldn't help feel uneasy.

Clack.

The door swung open again. Zuiju raised her head.

Fanlu strode into the room, slumped down in a chair. He didn't speak, just looked at Zuiju.

Surprised, Zuiju asked, "Why'd you come back?"

Translation Notes:

- "Changxiao": Literally means "long laugh".
- "Dwindling blossoms and off falls foliage, the drizzles of hurt autumn." (ch50): I believe this is an allusion to "Ba Sheng Gan Zhou", which is a poem so this sentence doesn't make much sense in prose. My interpretation of this poem is mainly about homesickness, but the poet stays in his current location because it's tied to a woman he longs for but can't have.
- "Green screens" (ch46): Has been implied before by "blinds" but never quite explained. Often important people and women, especially unmarried

women, can hide behind a screen or blind to talk with others. It's for social modesty.

- “Wrapped up rice parcel” (ch46): A more literal translation is “wrapped up zongzi”. Zongzi are a special type of rice dumplings that are traditionally eaten during the Duanwu Festival. Even though this paragraph's content is quite brutal, it's quite funny in itself hence it has been translated as “rice parcel” to try and convey this humour.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 57

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch57

The battle of countering the old forces was played fast and excitingly. Several hundred thousand soldiers tightly surrounded the capital while Yaotian panicked over finding herself pregnant. Her pregnancy helped He Xia immensely. He had an excuse to send the esteemed Princess into the depths of the Royal Residence or put under house arrest and forbidden to interfere with complicated national affairs any more.

Within a few days, a document containing Gui Changqing's signature admitting treason was brought before Yaotian. Soon after, he was displayed on Yun Chang's city wall alongside many other traitors and the rest of the Gui family so the peasants could recognise their crimes.

"Never expected that the Senior Official would...really..."

"The Gui family has always held positions of authority generation after generation, yet why are they all traitors this time?"

"Human hearts are unpredictable, very unpredictable indeed..."

The evidence steadily surfaced without end and everyday someone would report of the Gui family's treason. Now that the almighty Senior Official admitted treason, what did these utterly oblivious ordinaries know what was true or false?

Not to mention, the Dong Lin army controllers were disadvantaged in this expedition. The two disappointing generals from the Gui family, one trying to flaunt and the other an alcoholic, ended the lives of an entire regiment of several

thousands.

How could anyone who sent their sons to a brutal death in war not bitterly detest these generals who cared nothing for their subordinates?

But fortunately, in such an occasion of national crisis, the Prince Consort demonstrated excellent military organising abilities by rapidly weeding out the traitors. Not only that, he re-appointed all ranks within a very short time frame. Less than a month later, the passionate atmosphere that caused the peasants of Yun Chang to be so patriotic was seen once again.

Flags flapped in the sky while a hundred thousand set off.

The Prince Consort, brighter than any light they'd ever seen, once again led the army on an expedition.

"The world is vast but there is no place where my Yun Chang can't reach!" On the city wall platform, He Xia slashed with his sword.

The Princess' dignified figure was no longer seen by He Xia's side. She was deep in the Royal Residence, pregnant with Yun Chang's future king.

The soldiers' bloods raged regardless, and they jumped for joy.

They cheered for He Xia, raged for He Xia. Because, they had a hero.

Gui Le once had He Xia, Dong Lin had Chu Beijie and Bei Mo at least had Ze Yin. But today, Chu Beijie's whereabouts were unknown, and Ze Yin retired to seclusion.

Yet He Xia now belonged to Yun Chang.

With He Xia, there was no place where the Yun Chang army couldn't reach.

What was much more surprising though was that when He Xia had led the troops out of the capital, he commanded the entire army to set up a camp just after fifty miles. He summoned all of the generals into the advisory tent for a meeting.

Once everyone had all arrived, He Xia immediately said, "The army shall change direction, not heading towards Dong Lin."

These people had already gotten used to his odd, twisty-style of thinking a

while ago, so they weren't too surprised. They simply asked, "If not to Dong Lin, then where are going?"

"From now on, the army shall split up and travel at night. We'll meet at Bei Mo's borders."

Everyone seemed to understand he was planning to attack Bei Mo first.

Attacking Bei Mo first was right. Although the Dong Lin army no longer had Chu Beijie, even tattered ships hold power in their heavy metal nails. They weren't easy to defeat. The Bei Mo army wasn't that strong in general, not to mention they no longer had Ze Yin. War was like eating persimmons where you always had to choose the softest first.

Qing Tian had several experiences of expeditions. He pondered for a while and thought of a question that could not be ignored. He submissively asked He Xia, "Prince Consort wants us to attack Bei Mo which is totally fine. However, Dong Lin is my Yun Chang's utmost enemy while Gui Le is also eyeing on all of us. What if we fight against Bei Mo and the other two countries decide to join in the battle, causing us to be attacked from three sides?"

"No one wants to be attacked by three sides. That's why Bei Mo definitely doesn't expect us to suddenly attack them."

He Xia lightly laughed, "Don't worry, Generals. I naturally dare challenge Bei Mo because I already have plans to wipe out the Bei Mo army rapidly. Dong Lin is currently administrated by the Queen. When it comes to battle, women are always hesitant and never make their mind. By the time she has set her mind on attacking us, the Bei Mo army's power would already be completely wiped away by us."

The crowd wasn't quite as courageous as He Xia. "Once we've wiped away Bei Mo, we still have to counter Dong Lin. How could we possibly have the resources to stop Gui Le?"

"That's the most interesting part." He Xia looked proud. He raised his voice. "Zhaoxing, come in!"

The flap lifted and crashed. A thin military general strode in. He acknowledged the generals before standing by He Xia's side. He looked fairly calm.

He Xia introduced, “Fei Zhaoxing is Gui Le’s General Le Zhen’s most trusted confidant. He was the one who notified the ambush prepared by the King of Gui Le last time.” He raised a hand and lightly gestured at Fei Zhaoxing.

Fei Zhaoxing lowered his voice. “The Queen of Gui Le asked me to bring the message to Prince Consort in secret. The King of Gui Le had planned to ambush Prince Consort’s men. As long as I write a letter and get someone to send it to the King of Gui Le, informing him about the Queen of Gui Le and the Le family, the infrastructure of Gui Le will completely collapse. They wouldn’t have time to care about the battle between Yun Chang and Dong Lin.”

The General of the Weimo Regiment was curious, “The Queen of Gui Le’s Le family is completely devoted to Gui Le. Why would she actually send a private report to Prince Consort and betray the King of Gui Le?”

Fei Zhaoxing simply replied, “To stop Bai Pingting from entering the Gui Le harem.”

The generals were relieved.

Hearing Bai Pingting’s name, He Xia’s eyes darkened. He was silent for a long time before the colour returned to his eyes, “Fei Zhaoxing’s private letter is already on its way to the capital. The King of Bei Mo isn’t suspecting us at the slightest while Dong Lin is momentarily fearful of us, so they won’t fight again so easily. Everyone, now is the best time to conquer Bei Mo.”

He Xia’s plan was carefully and meticulously arranged. At first the generals couldn’t dare believe what they had heard, but now the colour of joy had returned to their cheeks. They shouted in reply, “Always listen to Prince Consort’s instructions!”

All traces of the Yun Chang army were suddenly lost. No one knew where they’d gone.

“Waaah...waaahhh...”

Pingting hurriedly walked into the room. She saw little Ze Qing placed on Yangfeng’s knee, his little bum revealed. Her hand moved up and down as she slapped the tender skin.

“Yangfeng, what are you doing that for?”

Yangfeng's anger was apparent. She reached out a hand to point at the ground, "Look what he dragged out from underneath the bed. Not only that, he was playing it with Changxiao. What would we do if he hurts Changxiao in the process?"

Pingting lowered her head and became shocked to see a sword shining on the floor. "These two children are far too naughty. Changxiao, you need to be punished too." She pulled the standing Changxiao down too.

Changxiao still couldn't speak. He looked quite chubby, his eyes bright and clear. He simply just grinned when he saw his mother returned.

"Yangfeng, don't hit Ze Qing any more. I bet it was Changxiao at fault. Don't judge him by his small size. When he walks and runs, you have no idea how much of a rascal he is."

Ze Qing's little bum was struck a few times. He was like Changxiao, didn't like to cry so he immediately wriggled out onto the floor when his bum no longer hurt. Yangfeng struck a few times. It hurt her heart dearly, so all she could do was helplessly let him free.

"Ah...smile...smile..." Once Ze Qing had gotten onto the ground, sprinted away from the mother who had painfully struck his bum, heading straight towards the merry Changxiao. He grabbed a hold of Changxiao and dashed outside, declaring "Bamboo, bamboo..." He was much faster than Changxiao at running, so Changxiao jumped and staggered, dragged out of the wooden door.

"Ze Qing, you are not to shake the bamboo poles of the clothes line." Yangfeng chased them out of the door, "Let go of Changxiao and take care so he won't fall."

"Yangfeng, it's fine." Pingting walked to a stop behind her, placing her hands on her shoulder. She smiled, "Look at that anxious look on your face. Don't worry about Changxiao. Just let children fall so they may grow." She turned and picked up the sword on the floor.

It was a fine sword. The blade was like water. Just one slight shake was enough to quiver sunlight with its chilling glint. Pingting flipped the hilt and as expected, the words "Divine Spirit" were carved into it. She couldn't help but become silent. After a while, she asked, "Why does the Divine Spirit Precious Sword that

once shook the world so many times remain here in the dust? Such a pity.”

Yangfeng turned around to see Pingting staring at the sword. Her heart leapt. Chu Beijie came up onto the mountain, received the news of Pingting’s death and soon after left utterly dejected. She hadn’t told Pingting that Chu Beijie left the precious sword, Divine Spirit, behind. She had stuffed it under the bed. Perhaps it was a trick of fate that those two brats fished it out. She thought for a while and lowered her voice, “Chu Beijie left it behind. He once came here to find you.” Seeing Pingting silent, Yangfeng couldn’t help add, “Pingting, do you still miss that man?”

Pingting didn’t reply, just stood in the room. Several moments later, she slowly slid the sword back into the scabbard, hung it, and turned to go outside. She called, “Changxiao, come, come, your mother will like to sing a pretty song for you.” On her delicate face was a doting smile.

“Mo...mother!” Changxiao giggled as he pounced forwards.

“I’m listening too!” Ze Qing was always by Changxiao’s side. He forced a spot by Pingting before Changxiao.

The sun was shining. Tiny ripples stretched across the surface of a pond at the front of the small hut.

Someone was softly singing.

“When there is trouble, there are heroes; when there are heroes, there are beautiful women; surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil...”

My son, your mother holds a story in her heart.

This story had heroes, beauties too.

The beauty and the hero once swore to the moon, to never turn against each other.

To never, ever, turn against each other.

The song was gentle and touching, full of love from the heart and anger from the mouth. Although the two kids didn’t understand the deeper meaning in it, they listened quietly, enraptured. They sat by Pingting on the threshold.

Before the song finished, Ze Yin’s figure suddenly appeared on the other side

of the fence. He hurried in, his expression looking very dark.

Pingting immediately stopped singing when she saw Ze Yin's expression. She stood up, imploring, "What's wrong?"

Ze Yin's expression remained dark as he shook his head. He was closely followed by Weiting. Both of their expressions were extremely twisted. None said a word as they strode into the room.

After a wet nurse was called to take the two kids to another place to play, Ze Yin closed the door before lowering his voice, "The King is dead."

Yangfeng was taken aback by this. "The King has always been healthy, so how could this be?"

"It's He Xia." Weiting painfully replied, "He Xia sent an invitation to the King to meet at the borders for a banquet. Yun Chang and Bei Mo have always been allied by friendship, so the King didn't suspect anything and just went..."

"That villain He Xia, he actually dared to poison the wine. They were also ambushed by armed soldiers, causing the King and his accompanying officials and guards to be killed instantly. The message has now spread throughout the country. Everyone is full of panic." Remembering the many favours between himself and Bei Mo, a tiger-like general such as Ze Yin couldn't help his eyes turn red with tears.

Yangfeng's face was full of disbelief. "Is He Xia crazy? Now that the King is dead, the Bei Mo army protecting nearby will suddenly command to attack."

"The Bei Mo army definitely doesn't dare to immediately attack." A crisp and decisive voice was heard from behind them.

The three people turned back. Pingting was standing by the table. She thoughtfully added, "Since He Xia dares murder the King of Bei Mo, then he must have enough troops to finish off the Bei Mo army, even if they're driven by revenge."

Ze Yin froze at the thought. "If Yun Chang dares to fully attack Bei Mo, then Dong Lin and Gui Le won't just sit around and spectate. Does He Xia dare to fight in a three-way war?"

“Main General, you’ve never fought against He Xi, correct?” Pingting pursed her lips, not sure whether to resent or to sigh. She whispered, “On the battlefield, he will never do anything he isn’t sure of.”

“Then should we send someone immediately to Ruo Han, to tell him to be careful?”

“...It’s too late...”

Fei Zhaoxing’s one private letter seriously intensified the conflict between the King of Gui Le and the Le family.

The matter regarding Bai Pingting was one that couldn’t be publicized, so the King of Gui Le found a random excuse to banish the Queen to the Cold Palace.

But the Le family’s power in Gui Le had already taken root and became very difficult to clear. Elder Statesman Le Di had long prepared for this. Before the King could take action, he made his smartest move ever. He raised his son Le Zhen to become the Main General. Before the King of Gui Le could order an attack, his son left the capital to take the soldiers on training.

Like that, the Gui Le king remained inside the capital while Main General Le Zhen took of the majority the soldiers outside. When the two finally clash, it would be quite the sight.

The Gui Le Royal Residence was caught in the shadow of civil strife, so even when the news of the King of Bei Mo’s assassination was reported, no one cared about who He Xia was attacking.

Of the four countries, Dong Lin was most anxious over He Xia’s actions.

“Please do discuss this.”

In the Royal Residence of Dong Lin, the Queen of Dong Lin was seated at the throne. She nervously glanced at the silent officials below her. “You have read the military report, so don’t tell me you don’t have anything to tell me? Generals and Officials, please discuss it.”

Chen Mu sighed. He hardened his resolve and stepped out. “Madam, my words remain the same. If He Xia dares attack Bei Mo’s army, then the next one he’d attack is us. Time is precious. We must immediately send the army to join

forces with Bei Mo to counter Yun Chang.”

“Absolutely not.” Chu Zairan’s hoarse voice rang out.

The Queen’s two princes had been murdered by the plotting of the King of Bei Mo. She really didn’t want to help Bei Mo out of their crisis. Hearing Chu Zairan’s words of disagreement, she busily added in a warm voice, “What does Senior Official suggest. Please do tell me.”

However, Chu Zairan walked out unsteadily. He raised his head and spoke, “Madam, our Dong Lin is no longer like the old times. If we still had the Duke of Zhen-Bei, what need is there to be afraid of He Xia? But now, the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s traces are all gone. I reckon that He Xia mustn’t be provoked, so don’t provoke him.”

Chen Mu urged, “He Xia is ambitious. Even if we don’t provoke him, he will still make a move on us. The Duke is gone now; my side is weak, so all the more reason for us to take the initiative. We must collaborate with the army of Bei Mo against He Xia to be able to protect ourselves.”

“Soldiers are fierce, and war is dangerous. The only way to survive is to protect ourselves.”

“The only true way to survive is to attack now.”

“If you have words, speak clearly and slowly. Senior Official...”

“After the battle between the Yun Chang and Bei Mo armies, they need time to recuperate. We can use this time to carefully train...”

“Don’t be too hasty, let us carefully discuss...”

“Discuss what? If we wait for He Xia to conquer Bei Mo, Dong Lin will become the next target. I’m afraid that the enemies will have already reached us before training has even begun!”

“Stop quarrelling!” The various officials in the hall debated without rest. The Queen scanned from left to right, then back again. Unable to bear it any longer, she slapped the armrest, causing all of the bickering people to quieten instantly.

“Sending soldiers to fight is an important national affair; it mustn’t be a hasty decision.” The Queen of Dong Lin rubbed her temples and sighed, “We must

think about this again and continue discussion tomorrow.”

Chen Mu’s eyebrows furrowed. He impatiently took a step forward, “Dear Queen, we mustn’t hesitate any longer. The Main General of Bei Mo, Ruo Han, has already launched attack. He Xia’s tactics are never without loophole so I’m afraid that in just a few days, the entire Bei Mo army will be annihilated.”

The Queen of Dong Lin was slightly angry. “Did I not say to think for now and continue discussion later? General Chen, don’t say any more.” She stood up and hurried to the other side of the bead curtain.

The Queen of Dong Lin’s reaction was exactly what He Xia had expected. Without the threat of Gui Le and Dong Lin, He Xia freely moved all of the military forces to attack Bei Mo.

What happened next shook the entire four countries.

Under the foot of the Songsen Mountains, in a place known as Zhouqing, the Yun Chang soldiers appeared to have formed from thin air or drilled out from the ground, assembling into a strong army. They raised the head of the King who died such a painful death, the enraging the grieving Bei Mo soldiers. Under He Xia’s meticulous planning and command, this decisive battle became an unprecedented massacre.

The Yun Chang army completely annihilated Ruo Han’s troops and casualties in the Bei Mo army were numerous. Less than a tenth managed to escape with their lives.

And that was Bei Mo’s hugest and most important military force.

The Battle of Zhouqing once again proved He Xia’s outstanding military skills.

Following that, He Xia’s forces rapidly expanded beyond all imagination. After defeating Ruo Han’s army, He Xia proceeded to annihilate Bei Mo’s other reinforcements at the speed of light. They then turned their gazes to Dong Lin who missed their only chance.

Yun Chang’s warriors never thought taking over the four countries would be so easy. The victories caused their morale to boost even higher.

After several hundreds of blades, they managed to cut open Dong Lin’s

checkpoints. In the midst of gushing blood, He Xia's flag always flew in the very front.

In the eyes of the soldiers that followed him, he was like a god of war.

The blood seeped into several hundred miles worth of land. Yun Chang was the centre of the shadow of war, spreading in all directions as they advanced their army bit by bit.

The Bei Mo army was annihilated. Even the corpses of Bei Mo's Royal House ceased to exist.

The Dong Lin army was annihilated. General Chen Mu was killed in battle while Moran led the remainder to protect the Queen of Dong Lin as she left the Royal Residence.

The captured Senior Official, with his elderly long white hair, was humiliated. He committed suicide by poison before Yun Chang soldiers broke into his house.

No one thought that He Xia could do all this in such a short period of time.

"The army of Yun Chang is coming! Yun Chang's army is coming!"

"Run! Have to run..."

"Daddy! Daddy, where are you?"

Bones were left everywhere on the muddy plains. Defeated soldiers and fleeing peasants were scattered throughout. Everyone scrambled to be first, afraid of being left behind. Others steadied the old and pushed the young in a desperate attempt to escape.

But who could possibly be faster than He Xia's battle horse?

Translation Notes:

- "Cold Palace": When the women in the royal harem are no longer "active". This may suggest that they aren't loved (detested even) or aren't fertile. It's better than execution...however, you drag your family down (most of the harem are daughters of wealthy/noble families). There wouldn't be much medical treatment, quality food, or fine clothes they are used to. Many die without funerals or get driven crazy by lack of love.

- “Persimmons...softest”: You can substitute the “softest persimmon” to “weakest opponent”. Although likely to be unintentional by the author, it is interesting to note that soft persimmons are really sweet. Victory is considered sweet so this implies that war is about the sweetest victory. Attacking Bei Mo supposedly leads to a rewarding victory, because they are a better country yet they fall without too much sacrifice from Yun Chang.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 58

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch58

The war spread. Even remote villages were not spared.

The grief over the loss of the King was weaker as the cloud of He Xia's conquest hung over these people who lived by the day.

"I announce, the Prince Consort of Yun Chang has given his Order. The peasants in each village will be counted and every person must give three bags of grain. This is to be paid in full in two days, without delay."

The gathered villages started panicking.

"Three bags per person, then how are we to last through winter?"

"He doesn't want us to live!"

"Mayor," someone grabbed onto the elderly mayor who had just finished reading the Order. He cried, "You know the daily life of my family. My wife is sick so all grain has been swapped for medicine. I'm not able to give just one bag, not to mention three."

The mayor was frowning too. He lowered his voice, "What can I do? The several children in my family count too and I'm distressed over the grain too. Luo-boy, we have to pay up or else, because they're tribute to the army. If it's a bit late, they'll have your life. Those Yun Chang soldiers kill without batting an eyelid."

Luo-boy's eyes felt sour. He rubbed his eyes and slumped, "When our King was still around, we were never required to pay three bags of grain all at once. He Xia, hmph, why the hell did He Xia conquer our Bei Mo?"

"Do you value your life, daring to mention the King?" The mayor looked

anxiously at their surroundings after muffling his ragged cuffs around his mouth. He warned, “Just be obedient. We don’t even know where General Ruo Han has fled to, so don’t try to overestimate yourself, okay?”

While he was speaking, the sky-shattering thudding sound of hooves were heard, and the crowd jumped back in fright. Everyone’s head swivelled to look outside the village. They saw the flag of Yun Chang soldiers surging forwards from the distance.

“What happened? Is there anything wrong?”

The soldiers reached the village entrance and pulled their horses to a stop. The villagers looked up, momentarily blinded by the sword blades dazzling in the sun.

“Who is in charge of you?” The one in front studied the mayor, “Do you already know about the Prince Consort’s Order for grain?”

“Yes, yes, it’s been read.”

“Did anyone make trouble?”

“No, no. We are all good peasants.”

“Okay.” The captain grunted and dragged out his following words, “You Bei Mo people were supposed to be our Yun Chang army’s slaves, but Prince Consort has given mercy, leaving you to supply resources for the army. You are to properly grow crops and look after horses. The Prince Consort has also issued boundary placements. From now on, if the village finds any outsiders, they must be immediately reported. If you dare conceal and not report him, this village will be disposed according to rebellion. Is that all clear?”

The mayor was very frightened. He hurriedly nodded and forced a laugh, “Yes, yes, it’s all clear. We are all good peasants, good peasants.”

That captain saw that he had been frightened to a tremble and couldn’t help laugh disdainfully. “Good peasants? Jiaokou Villiage fifty miles beyond here said that they were good peasants too, but they privately hid a few remnants of the Bei Mo army. The entire village of one hundred and seventeen was completely slaughtered by us. Hmph, I reckon we should put up a few bloody heads so that you know what real good peasants are like. Let’s go, my brothers.”

Luo-boy suddenly collapsed onto the ground, holding his head in his hands as he wept.

“Luo-boy, what are you crying for?”

“Don’t ask.” A few spectators sighed, “His sister married into Jiaokou Village.”

Everyone grieved.

The country was falling.

Life and death was not a choice, just a matter of tolerance against suffering.

A-Han went past the fence with large, powerful strides, heading straight for the stone chair in the courtyard. He yelled at Ze Yin, “Brother, it’s no good. I can’t take it anymore. I want to become a soldier and attack that He Xia bastard! What kind of life is this? That much grain, where on earth can you get that much grain? If all that goes to keeping soldiers alive, then what about my woman and child?”

“A-Han, shut up first. Don’t ask for trouble.” Yangfeng hurried out from the building and ruefully glared at A-Han. She lowered her voice, “He Xia sent his Order. A person is awarded fifty-two gold coins for every rebellious person exposed. Be more careful or people will report you, shouting that so loudly.”

“Grain robbed, house ransacked and even the chickens are gone. What is there to be afraid of?” A-Han shook his head, “I’m not afraid of death.”

“Then your wife and child?”

“I...” A-Han’s neck stiffened. His shoulders fell in the end. “What use is there to live? They’re making it impossible for us to live...” His voice drifted off.

A strangled silence burst into the courtyard. Ze Yin had been silent all along, quietly wiping the hoe in his hand. It didn’t look much like a hoe but more like the sword the precious sword that had been by the Main General’s waist back then.

Weiting couldn’t help but walk over. He lowered his voice, “If this goes on, we’ll be forced to death. Why don’t we...”

“Why don’t we what? The army of Bei Mo has lost, so who else can defeat He Xia’s army?”

“Don’t tell me we’ll become prisoners of war and let our sons and grandsons bear the shame?” Weiting made his words harsher but pressed to lower his voice even more. “With General’s fame, if you go down the mountain now, you should be able to summon many with a single call.”

Weiting’s words seemed to evoke some old aspirations. Ze Yin’s eyes were suddenly a bit brighter. He trembled twice, his face tensing up. The change was only temporary like a shooting star that gradually dimmed away.

If he were to go down, he would indeed be able to gather several hot-blooded citizens of Bei Mo. However, even with several multiplies, it wouldn’t be enough to threaten He Xia’s army.

He wasn’t fighting against someone else, but He Xia.

He witnessed Chu Beijie’s strength and knew He Xia’s fame was just as equal. There wasn’t a chance of victory even if their military power was the same.

Not to mention that the gap between the armies was too wide.

It would be a massacre. He would be those Bei Mo peasants dissatisfied by the oppression into a massacre. That would be even more desolate than the slaughter in the Battle of Zhouqing.

“General...”

“Don’t say any more.” Ze Yin put down the hoe. “Bring the water and the food Yangfeng prepared. It’s time to go to the fields.”

The message was spread to the most remote of villages beyond the dark clouds, spreading terrified eyes and whispers.

The King’s only brother, Duke of Zhong-Tan, called the fleeing Bei Mo soldiers to assemble and fight against He Xia. Less than ten days later, thirty thousand people gathered. The army of volunteers were defeated by He Xia’s generals thirty miles away from the suburbs while the Duke of Zhong-Tan was caught alive. He was tortured and sentenced to death by being cut into pieces.

The retreating Dong Lin army amassed all of their forces and fought against Yun Chang once more, going against He Xia with a big bang. He Xia however used sly tricks, placing an ambush in the valley. The Dong Lin army once again fell and

suffered many casualties. Their corpses were everywhere, and blood stained Dong Lin's Fuzha River.

The cloud of danger now loomed over Gui Le. The army of Yun Chang pressed closer towards Gui Le's capital and the terrified King of Gui Le was likely to surrender. Le Zhen who always kept an eye on the King of Gui Le noticed the situation wasn't good. He promptly led the army away from the Yun Chang army by heading towards Gui Le's borders.

Message after message countered He Xia's victories and the Yun Chang army's glory. Thanks to the immense pressure they needed to project, the army's crushing demand for resources increased upon the peasants of the fallen countries.

At first they demanded grain but now each family must supply three pounds of iron so the army had the raw materials to build the weapons needed.

The market was in recession; the iron shop door was tightly closed.

The villagers were very worried.

"Fifteen pounds of iron. Don't tell me they want us to give up our cooking pots. I refuse!"

"You refuse. Do you want to be like Luo-boy then?"

The poorest man of the village, Luo-boy, was unable to supply the grain so his skinny head was raised high up in the village. His sickly wife tied a noose the next day, suicide by hanging.

"If we give them our pots, then how are we to cook?"

"Do you want your life or the pots?"

"Even if we give the pots, it won't be enough."

The elderly mayor's yellowed eyes watched his fellow villagers he known for so many years. His mouth slowly quivered out, "You must give that hoe too..."

"How could that He Xia...be so unreasonable?"

"He has an army in his hands."

"What about our Bei Mo's army?"

“Defeated. No one can defeat He Xia.”

“Why can no one defeat him, with the world so big? How is this fair?”

“I heard there was one...” A phrase floated amongst the crowd.

Their devastated eyes suddenly widened as their gazes pinned on the one who spoke.

“Who?”

The villager had only heard fragments of rumours. After thinking, he replied, “I think it was Duke of Bei something, something Chu maybe...”

“Then where is he?”

“About that...I don’t know...”

The people were disappointed. Their eyes gained glint of light instantly dimmed. Whether they were squatting or leaning against the wall, each were in silent daze.

Three pounds of iron required today. What about tomorrow?

Smashed pots and a used hoe was finally enough metal to hand to the soldiers. The sunshine seemed to be oblivious to the anger and depression. It just continued to shine down on the earth in high spirits.

Ze Yin was in the fields, sweating as he lifted and dropped the hoe. This was the only remaining hoe left in the house.

The King had died; the country collapsed.

Soldiers came and went, riding where they pleased and wrecking his effortful husbandry. It felt like Ze Yin’s heart had been burdered by a boulder. It was crushing his heart to pieces, crushing until it bled.

He was once the Main General and held the most military power in Bei Mo. He led a army of high morale and sworn to protect his country’s king and its peasants.

Yet now, the King died and the peasants were being trod on by other horses.

If his opponent wasn’t He Xia, if he didn’t have to worry about his wife and child, would he remain here silently waving a hoe, letting those violent soldiers

snatch away his hard-earned results?

Yangfeng looked at him every night with worried eyes. Only when Ze Yin watched Qing'er and Changxiao-two kids who didn't know sadness, just joy-did the boulder on his heart become a little lighter.

But when he turned away, the boulder would weigh heavily again until it almost seemed to suffocate him.

"Brother! Brother!"

Ze Yin raised his head, bean-sized sweatdrops all over his face. A-Han huffed as he ran from a shortcut. "Brother, Brother, it's terrible! Brother Wei has been caught by the soldiers!"

Ze Yin stiffened. He threw the hoe down and ran towards him, "Where is he?"

"He's outside the village on the hillside, next to the edge of the large meadow."

Not waiting for A-Han to finish, Ze Yin headed towards the village entrance.

Weiting, he knew Weiting.

That grumpy man, a man who wouldn't even look at his superiors' face in the past. He only knew how to strike, clench his teeth down and fight. His foul temper was stubborn too. Ze Yin deliberately asked him to go out on the grass plains so that he wouldn't be able to hear each and every one of He Xia's messages which all served as a death sentence for the peasants. Why did he run into Yun Chang's soldiers?

Ze Yin madly ran all the way to the slopes until his pupils shrank at the sight. On the ground, the grass was a mess, as if numerous people had trampled over it. There were bright red blood stains extending to the other side of the hill.

"Weiting!" Ze Yin cried as he went on the other side.

Weiting was lying on the slope, appearing to have rolled down from the damp blood tracks on the grass. Ze Yin rushed forwards, got on one knee, and helped him up. "Weiting, how are you?"

"They...they..." Weiting's head and face were swollen while the wounds on his body oozed blood. They were either sword or spear wounds. "...stole horse..."

and...sheep...I..."

"Don't speak, don't move." Ze Yin lowered his voice, "I understand."

Yangfeng and Pingting were shocked when Ze Yin carried back Weiting. The wet nurse hurriedly took the two children to another room while the two women divided the work to wrap up Weiting's wounds in bandages.

"Horse and sheep...all..."

"Don't speak any more." Yangfeng's gentle voice instructed Weiting, who was still struggling to speak. She sighed, "Stealing things is fine, but is there a need to beat him up like this?"

Ze Yin replied, "It's already quite good he's still alive."

Weiting lived in the same secluded residence and was like family to them. Once Weiting's wounds were properly bandaged, they left him to rest on the bed. The other people left the room, each in their own thoughts. Yangfeng boiled a bowl of porridge for Weiting. Since there wasn't much grain left, the rest of them ate yams for dinner.

After a busy day, it was finally time to rest. Yangfeng lay on the bed but couldn't get to sleep at all. She looked at Ze Yin, deep in sleep, before getting out of bed.

It was early autumn and the night breeze was extremely pleasant. She walked to the front of the house but caught a glimpse of the lonely figure in the courtyard, standing against the breeze.

"Pingting?"

Pingting slowly turned around.

In the moonlight, Yangfeng could see that the object she was holding in her arms. That sword, "Divine Spirit", fit to display on the walls, was now secure in Pingting's embrace.

Yangfeng went to her side.

"You can't sleep either?"

"Is that person really missing?"

It seemed time united with the halo of moonlight. Under the halo was a face, same yet different.

Heroic, tough, overbearing, proud...

When attacking Gui Le, just one tactic was enough to ruin the House of Jing-An with a century's worth of history. When attacking Bei Mo, just three moves were enough to disrupt the hearts of the Bei Mo generals. Whenever they heard his name, they would be plagued by nightmares. When he attacked Yun Chang, he shook the entire country from the Princess to the peasants. Everyone was anxious without exception.

Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie.

He was the heir to the throne of Dong Lin, a respected, widely acclaimed general. Each of the monarchs deeply feared him yet all traces of him disappeared when the Yun Chang army began poisoning the world.

"Pingting, you understand more about these things than I do. I just want to know if there is anyone who could possibly stop He Xia."

"Master...sigh, He Xia..." Pingting deeply sighed and smiled bitterly. "I'm afraid that perhaps only one person could stop him and you understand who that is. Yangfeng, do you think I should..."

"No!" Yangfeng forcefully interrupted Pingting's words. Her face was dismayed. She repeatedly shook her head, as if gone through the most painful nightmare ever experienced. It took quite a long time before she was able to calm down. She hung her head sadly, saying, "Don't ask me. What difference is this to that day when danger was looming over Kanbu? I've been wrong once. I mustn't make the same mistake a second time. Pingting, I swore that no matter what, I will never beg you to leave the mountains. Not to mention, he's already been missing for a long time. Even if you go out, where on earth will you go to find him?"

Pingting listened and for the longest time, she was silent. She clutched onto Divine Spirit and returned inside. Changxiao was in the cradle, fast asleep. The moonlight gently scattered over his little face, printing the outline of his handsome features, the same mold as his father.

Pingting watched her son, smiling as she murmured, “Changxiao, Changxiao, do you know why I called you Changxiao? I hope that this little of face of yours will always be smiling and that you encounter things that will make you smile every day.”

“Dear son, I dearly hope you won’t fall for an intelligent woman.”

“Women who are too intelligent will always have a stupid fault. Once your heart gets knotted, you’ll never be able to undo it.”

“If she doesn’t like you, you will be upset; if she likes you too much, both of you will be distraught.”

Yun Chang, Qierou City.

“You lied!”

“What did I lie about?”

“You said you’d deliver it to Teacher. Fanlu, you liar!”

Fanlu easily grabbed Zuiju’s jade-like hand, who had been planning to thump his chest. He frowned, “How many times do I have to repeat till you understand? Dong Lin is currently like messy porridge, defeated soldiers and fleeing peasants are everywhere. Even the Queen of Dong Lin’s whereabouts are unknown. The messenger can’t even find your Teacher. Still hitting me? You still dare hit me? Oi, I’m going to fight back!”

Recently, his life hadn’t been too good. After the death of the Senior Official, the officials on He Xia’s side started to nit-pick on all of the ranking soldiers raised by the Senior Official.

One time the accounts weren’t adding up. Another time a report wasn’t written clearly enough. It was obvious they were trying to find fault with him, a city governor.

And here, because Zuiju knew about the mess in Dong Lin, her worries were numerous so she screamed nonstop. “Liar!” Zuiju’s two wrists were now both caught, so she could only use her raven-black eyes to glare at him.

“When have I lied to you?” Fanlu snapped.

“When have you told me the truth?”

Fanlu was dissatisfied. His face darkened, "Of course I have told you the truth before."

Zuiju's wrists began to feel uncomfortable, but her struggles did nothing to free them. Her face flushed with anger as she looked up to ask, "The truth? Hmph, when was that?"

Fanlu thought carefully and replied, "When I first talked to you, I said— Rumour has it that you're not beautiful, but I think you're not too bad. Yep, that's definitely true."

Zuiju was slightly stunned by this. The blush originally caused by anger now spread to her ears and soon it went beyond them. Even her neck felt hot.

She calmed down, only just realising that she was almost in Fanlu's arms. She bit her lip, "Hey, let go," she replied in embarrassment.

"Whose 'hey'?"

Zuiju shot daggers at him with a glare until she saw the corners of his mouth lift. He had undoubtedly thought of another idea and she was actually a bit afraid of him being up to no good. She could only swallow her complaints, carefully saying, "Please let go of me, Governor."

Fanlu began to smirk, pleased at himself, before loosening his grip. Zuiju withdrew her hands and noted that her wrists were red. That hateful man actually had quite a bit of strength. She gave him a reproachful glance and sat on the bed. Thinking of her Teacher amongst all those fleeing refugees made her heart worry and ache, causing her eyes to redden.

Fanlu saw that her head was lowered and was silent. He seemed to lose interest as she was usually so lively and reckless. He came and sat down beside her, "I'll get someone to send your letter again and I hope he will find your Teacher."

Zuiju shifted her body, "Don't come so close to me." Her voice was as light as mosquito.

"What'd you say?" Fanlu asked loudly, taking a step forward until he was closer than before.

Zuiju abruptly stood up and stomped. “You...don’t you understand it’s improper for men and women to interact so casually?”

“You woman,” Fanlu stood up, several inches taller than her. His voice was rather commanding, “Don’t you understand that women always say something but want the other?”

“Who wants the other?”

“You! When I come nearer, you’re actually pretty happy, so why do you say something else?”

“I...I...” Zuiju was almost angered to tears and she continuously stomped. “When have I been happy? I’m still worried about Teacher and you just bully me...I should have just let you die on the Songsen Mountains so that the wolves could eat your stomach and your intestines...”

She had yet to finish when a huge figure had already filled her eyes, shocking Zuiju to close her eyes and take a step back. However, she hadn’t expected her waist to be tightly hugged.

Fanlu’s tongue slipped across her red lips like the heat of a fire.

“Ah...” Zuiju paled in shock. Her eyes were rounder than ever as she faced Fanlu’s hateful grin.

Fanlu loosened his grip and smiled, “Don’t think about your Teacher tonight. Think about me.” He waved a hand in front of the solidified Zuiju and left to deal with his documents.

Yangfeng walked into the room. The bed was already empty and Ze Yin was no longer to be seen. Her heart thumped slightly. She tiptoed deftly into the side room and peered inside. Ze Yin had his waist bent, rummaging through a pile of random old objects.

“What are you looking for?” She whispered.

Ze Yin stiffened. Quite a bit of time passed before he turned around and slowly straightened his back. In the moonlight, Yangfeng clearly saw his eyes.

They were eyes full of spirit.

But when those eyes display such liveliness, it meant their owner had made a

very important decision.

A decision that could not be changed.

Yangfeng remembered the year Ze Yin –the King of Bei Mo’s messenger at the time–was sent to pay his regards to Gui Le. They met at Prince He Su’s Residence. She played a piece and raised her delicate hands to lift the curtain a little. In that moment, she had seen the very same expression.

Yangfeng’s heart felt like it was being hurled out.

After that, Ze Yin explained that he had decided that even if he offended the entire Royal House of Gui Le, he would marry her.

He wasn’t particularly handsome and compared to the Marquess of Jing-An, he was not quite a romantic either. But he had black yet shining eyes, as if everything seen was taken to note and as if nothing in the world could make him hesitate.

“Husband, what are you looking for?” Yangfeng softly asked once more. Her heart ached with assumption and bewilderment as she carefully stepped closer so she could see Ze Yin’s face better.

“I didn’t find anything.” Ze Yin’s firm expressions flickered slightly before Yangfeng’s direct gaze.

As Yangfeng gazed, she noted his rough hands had unobtrusively been clenched into fists. Yangfeng quietly watched him. She seemed to have penetrated his heart, gaining insight on every single secret.

They had been husband and wife for several years now, from escaping the King of Gui Le’s side to seclusion to leaving the mountains into the Battle of Kanbu and back to seclusion...

The way to today had been a long journey. Now they had Qing’er. When they made the oath to live in seclusion forever, they had really thought they’d be able to keep it.

One was one of Gui Le’s two famous qin players, the other was the Main General of Bei Mo. All of their past glory. They thought they casted everything behind, but once again fate swirled.

Only today, after this mutual staring under the moon, did they come to understand everything about the truly brief moment of time they had spent together.

“The box on the left,” Yangfeng faintly replied.

“Hm?”

“Your sword, it’s in the box on the left.”

Staring at his feminine wife, Ze Yin’s eyes suddenly began to heat up.

“Yangfeng...”

Slender fingers came over his mouth, stopping him. Yangfeng studied him closely as if watching him a lifetime wasn’t enough, as if never having a good look at his face.

“It’s good, Qing’er looks like you. His father...is a hero then.” Yangfeng snuggled into her husband’s warm chest, trying to feel his breath. She hardened her heart, straightened her back before turning away. “I’ll wait for you.”

She gritted her teeth and went out of the small room. She returned to the bedroom and sat down on the side of the bed. Her legs felt they could never find strength to move any more.

She wasn’t tired. She just dazedly sat there. She sat, just like that, in the night like a stone statue.

She heard the sound of faint footsteps from outside the room. The sounds came closer and closer, each step pressing down uneasily at her heart until they could no longer be heard. Her mind began to spin with several memories. She continued to sit still as the moon leisurely sank and the sun slowly began to climb, the orange-red light revealing her tear-stained face.

“Yangfeng, it’s time to get up.” Pingting opened the curtain and saw Yangfeng’s back. She was momentarily surprised before turning to see the empty bed. “Where’s Ze Yin?” Her voice suddenly drifted.

“He left.”

“He left?” Pingting came a little closer. Yangfeng’s expression confirmed her suspicions. “Oh god...” Pingting took a deep breath of cold air, “Why didn’t you

stop him? Did you make him swear to stay with you in the secluded residence? Didn't you want him to not bother with that kind of thing anymore?"

Yangfeng turned to look at her. She looked devastated as she studied Pingting for a while. It seemed to make her a little more awake. She faintly smiled. "I have never liked him fighting wars to kill because it was all someone else's thoughts. He fought for power, protecting the throne while the King of Bei Mo used him as a tool for murder, a doll with a sword. But I let him pick up the sword now because he did so for himself." The morning breeze flickered past Yangfeng's face, gently blowing her gentle fringe. "It's something he wants to do. No one forced him, no begged him. It's something he whole-heartedly wanted to do. I mustn't stop him."

Although her words were quite vague, Pingting understood. She sighed, "Then what about you and Qing'er?"

"Qing'er and I will live properly. He will be like his father, living according the way he wants to live." Yangfeng grinned at Pingting. Her beauty was quite thrilling.

The sound of laughing came from outside. The two children had woken up. The wet nurse hurried and hugged one to feed him porridge.

Pingting accompanied Yangfeng for half the day before leaving quietly out the door. The sun began to lower while Changxiao and Ze Qing weaved in and out of the haystack, laughing without stop.

"Da...Daddy..." At night, Ze Qing strained his neck to look for the familiar figure.

Ze Qing habitually nodded, even when he didn't understand anything at all. Not long later, he started rummaging around, wanting to find his hidden daddy. Changxiao also appeared out of nowhere and started to help.

The harsh militaries piled on, one after the other. Rice jars were gradually emptied. Perhaps in another ten days, the children wouldn't have enough to eat.

Weiting lied on the bed, unable to move. When he was told that Ze Yin left, he summoned all his strength to nod but didn't say anything else.

Like that, a few days passed. The army of Yun Chang's behaviour suddenly

turned and the higher-ups issued another order, saying to track down defeated Bei Mo soldiers. Each one caught would receive a large bounty and those who protected them would be punished.

The soldiers hurried here and back. Every time they would send the entire village's hearts into turmoil. Everyone lived in fear.

Yangfeng and Pingting both began to worry for Ze Yin.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 59

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch59

After Dong Lin's capital was captured, He Xia sent soldiers to hunt down the remnants of the Royal House and generals. On the other hand, he ordered the Royal Residence of Dong Lin to be burned.

Thanks to the dancing fire torches of the Yun Chang soldiers, the capital of Dong Lin was enveloped by thick smoke while the bright flames in the Royal Residence dyed half the sky red.

“Royal Residence...the Royal Residence!” The peasants who remained in the capital raised their heads, their faces completely stained with tears as they watched the fire's sparks and the sharp blades.

He Xia's command to fiercely attack the remaining soldiers wasn't just to vent anger. It was costly to sustain such a huge army. No country had ever had such a vast territory, so he had to press on quickly and decisively.

To destroy a country, one must first destroy its citizens' confidence and trust.

The Royal Residence was burned down to flat pieces on the ground by the Yun Chang soldiers. To Dong Lin's lucky survivors, it meant their confidence was disintegrating.

After all, it was a symbol of centuries of the Royal House that completely disappeared in a fire. To all citizens of Dong Lin, this was the final punch to their overburdened hearts.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei that had given them such a strong sense of security was missing so who did they have to pin their hopes on?

The bad news seemed to have grown wings, flying through to every corner of

Dong Lin, making the trapped Dong Lin people even more desperate.

“King, what should we do?” The news travelled from a faraway place to where the remaining soldiers were reporting to the stiffly seated Queen.

More than half of the country’s land had been lost. The peasants had lost their homes while the Royal Residence was in ashes.

How did the once mighty Dong Lin fall to such a situation?

General Chen Mu had been killed in battle while Moran and Luoshang desperately protected her as she left the capital. Behind them, the sounds of killing shook the skies while the soldiers’ blood splattered over her adorned clothes.

Only then did she realise that the famous general Duke of Zhen-Bei was a treasure beyond gold. No wonder when the Dong Lin warriors mentioned the Duke of Zhen-Bei, their faces would reveal a delighted and proud look.

She was no longer a lady nestled safely deep in her residence. Now, she wore rough clothing, all excess magnificence removed. She was protected by the few remaining warriors of Dong Lin as she hid in remote wastelands or forests, avoiding the army of Yun Chang’s pursuits.

In the heavy darkness and anxiety for the future, the Queen often recalled the past.

Back then, Dong Lin held such power. The army was best adapted for war in the four countries, having the King and the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Where did the bad fortune start?

“Bai Pingting...” The name formed in the Queen’s mouth. She spat it out, the name that no one could ever let go of.

Bai Pingting made a move in Bei Mo, letting He Xia have a chance to intercept.

That day the famous Marquess of Jing-An, and later the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, conspired with the King of Bei Mo to poison her two underaged sons to death. It all foreshadowed the unfortunate state of today’s Dong Lin.

The death of the princes caused Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting to suspect each other, but at the same time it may had them love each other more deeply.

When their love became deeper, the army of Yun Chang and Bei Mo arrived.

The Queen's heart froze. Had the Prince Consort of Yun Chang planned this chain of deadly traps that led her country to its demise?

Step by step, he made Chu Beijie lose Bai Pingting, made Dong Lin lose Chu Beijie and finally, removed all traces of Dong Lin off the map...

"Madam! Madam!" The sounds of yelling and hurried footsteps were heard. The simple carriage window flap was lifted, revealing Luoshang's extremely frantic expression. "We've found traces of the Yun Chang army in front, they seem to be heading this way. Madam, we must evacuate immediately. Hurry! Hurry!" He gasped for breath as he spoke.

Again?

A feeling exhaustion ripped through the Queen, but she could not allow herself to be captured because she was the Queen, the sole symbol of Dong Lin's Royal House.

The Queen clenched her teeth and slowly got up.

"The horse has already been prepared. Please immediately get on the horse, Madam. Moran will take some people to block for a while and will then hurry to meet up with us."

The Queen got onto the horse.

Domineering figures filled the horizon. The Yun Chang's calvary surged forwards.

Luoshang got on behind as a defending soldier. He whipped the horse and urgently pressed forward to escape into the night.

Dear Pingting, if your soul is in heaven, please open your eyes to look at this messy world.

I'm willing to exchange all of the misfortunes you suffered for ten reincarnations of misfortune.

But please have mercy on us. For all these innocent peasants, return the Duke of Zhen-Bei to us.

He is this world's one and only hope.

In a small remote village of Bei Mo, the day smelled a bit different than usual. It was quite strange.

“Want to listen to a story?”

“Listen to a story?”

“Outside...on the hillside...path...came a storyteller.”

Everyone was whispering and would look around nervously from time to time, as if afraid that an armed Yun Chang soldier would suddenly emerge from the ground.

But everyone hid secrets and they all vaguely knew that this was no ordinary storyteller that spoke for fun. With slight expectation, they couldn't resist checking it out.

In such a suffocating troubled time, people needed a little bit of anticipation.

In the evening, a figure appeared on the hillside. At first there was just one but then another and another, carefully walking over. Gradually, even pairs and small groups of three began to arrive at a time.

Their faces carried fear, deeply afraid of being caught, but when they suddenly saw an acquaintance, their eyes would reveal the flickering light of surprise and following that, encouragement.

They had all gathered by the little patch of darkening grass and due to the obscured moon, they struggled to see. They vaguely made out the figures. There weren't just of men but women too.

“Ah, don't squeeze in.”

“A-Han, you're here too?” Another familiar fellow villager whispered.

The sound of A-Han's doting laugh was heard in the darkness. “Of course, my wife is here too.”

Someone hushed them. “Be quiet, the story is about to be told...”

Instantly it quietened down.

This was a fantastic storyteller. The storyteller sat on the grass. The crowd

could only make out the outline of his body in the dim light as they waited eagerly and impatiently for the storyteller to begin, but no one spoke a word.

The storyteller cleared his throat. His voice was low and spoke in measured tones. Although it wasn't pleasant to the ear, it gave people energy.

"My fellow villagers, today I am going to tell you a story. I'll say this first that the events in this story happened not long ago and is a real incident. Those vicious Yun Chang people don't want to let other people know but we storytellers of Bei Mo who have lost their homes have heard of it. We have made it into a story and have been telling it in every direction. I know these days storytellers are executed every day, but storytellers are in endless supply. Once one has told to ten, ten will tell to another hundred. I'm not afraid of death and I am the same as the other executed storytellers. I just want all of Bei Mo's people to know of this story..."

In the darkness, the storyteller paused. He seemed to be collecting his thoughts together.

For some reason, the entire audience held back their breaths to keep silent, regardless of their usual rude, timid or indifferent personalities. They all seemed to know that they were about to hear some thrilling news.

"Our bitter life is all caused by a demon. This demon is called He Xia. He used to be Gui Le's Marquess of Jing-An and later the Prince Consort of Yun Chang. He was the one who killed our King during a banquet by poison, forced us to give up our grain, stole our horses, cattle & sheep and killed our loved ones. Our Main General Ruo Han led the army of Bei Mo to fight against him, but He Xia is a world-acclaimed general so Main General Ruo Han lost. Our Bei Mo army was defeated, which is akin to breaking the backbone of us Bei Mo people..."

When mentioning today's tragic situation, everyone's hearts fell, both furious and upset. They lowered their heads in sadness.

The storyteller's tone was full of grief. Then he stopped, suddenly swapping to an excited tone. "But do you still remember our Main General Ze Yin? Back when he went into seclusion, Dong Lin's Chu Beijie arrived. He came out of the mountains and pushed Chu Beijie back home. Now that He Xia has come to harm our Bei Mo, how could Main General Ze Yin just sit and watch? My fellow

villagers, the Main General has come out of the mountains!”

A ripple gently stirred the crowd. Everyone was suddenly impacted with the face of hope, the darkness in their eyes began to lighten.

“Main General, we still have a Main General...”

“Main General, where is he? Where?”

“Hush, allow me to finish.” The entire crowd quietened with just a single word from the storyteller. Everyone was listening attentively again, “Main General Ze Yin is a general who can lead soldiers well. He knows Bei Mo’s military power can’t defeat Yun Chang’s, and direct confrontation will only result in harming the few remaining soldiers of Bei Mo. The Main General can’t do that. He said goodbye to his family and left the secluded residence. He knew He Xia was Yun Chang’s main advisor, and without He Xia, the Yun Chang army would collapse. The Main General thought for a long time and finally decided to write a personal letter of challenge to He Xia.”

The crowd gasped with an “Ah”, which seemed to be a woman’s voice.

The crowd were all anxious to hear the rest but A-Han wasn’t too anxious about it. “He Xia has so many soldiers so if they all attack together, the Main General would definitely lose.”

The storyteller replied, “No. Although He Xia is a demon, he is still a man with a rarely seen warrior’s spirit and expert swordsmanship. The Main General sent the challenge letter to let the other generals know of his move on purpose. If He Xia didn’t dare welcome the challenge or didn’t face it head-on, then the other generals would look down on him. The Main General noted this very point, He Xia’s high regard of himself.”

“Then did our Main General...defeat He Xia?” A person in the darkness nervously asked.

The storyteller sighed. His sigh made the silence even more suspenseful.

“It’s not easy. Although the Main General has fine swordsmanship, He Xia’s is very fine as well. In terms of outcome, He Xia had a slightly greater chance of winning.”

“Then...if there was no chance of winning all along, why did the Main General challenge him? Isn't that suicidal?”

“Yes...suicidal.” This made the people who had guessed correctly sighed again. The storyteller lowered his voice, “Perhaps someone may have asked the Main General the very same thing. The Main General said back then, ‘If I kill He Xia by luck, than Bei Mo must be blessed but if He Xia isn't killed and his life is ended, he will die a worthy death. Sigh...sigh...what a hero, our Bei Mo has our own hero...”

He shook his head as he sighed for while, but everyone else was still concerned about Ze Yin's life or death. They impatiently asked, “Sir, please do tell us. What on earth were the results in that battle?”

“He lost.” The storyteller spat out these words, causing all of the people's hearts to plummet. The storyteller sighed. “That day, the Main General set out alone with his horse and sword. He was to fight against He Xia, surrounded by Yun Chang's generals and soldiers, all of them cheering for He Xia. The Main General understood that if he killed He Xia, he wouldn't be able to survive. The two combat masters clashed, their swords rattling as they thought a hundred strikes against each other. In the end, He Xia's swordsmanship emerged superior, aiming at a single gap, and the sword stabbed the Main General's abdomen...”

“Ah...”

“Oh god...” The crowd burst into shock, each seemingly feeling He Xia's sword stab into themselves.

The storyteller didn't care about the commotion amongst the crowd, simply remaining immersed in the scene that would forever be tragic. “The Main General was able to block this stab originally, but when He Xia lunged in, he didn't resist him. He didn't care whether he was near death or not, he went in to cut He Xia's throat. He Xia was plenty powerful himself, so that was able to dodge, but our Main General's final struggle is not easy to dodge. Although his sword didn't cut off his head, it stabbed into his shoulder.”

The storyteller hesitated for a moment, as if recollecting the thrilling scene. He slowly yet securely continued, “The Main General's abdomen was stabbed and

he fell off his horse. He Xia sat on the horse, the wound on his shoulder bleeding profusely. Dear people of Bei Mo, you really ought to have seen He Xia's expression at that moment, you really ought to. Seeing their main advisor hurt, Yun Chang's soldiers paled in shock, hurrying forwards to bandage them for him. He Xia stopped them with a hand, lowered his head and asked our Main General, 'Is this worth it?' and did you know what Main General replied with?" He stopped.

The audience was silent and were so numbed they could no longer feel their own breathing. They could only feel that they were standing there, watching the authoritative He Xia looking down from the horse and the seriously wounded Main General Ze Yin on the ground yet still had his dauntless pride.

It was a while before anyone finally whispered a word. "Sir, how did the Main General reply?"

The storyteller's head moved in the darkness as if faintly smiling. He sighed in both lament and admiration. "The Main General lifted his head, smiled at He Xia as he said, 'It's worth it. Because from now on, all of Bei Mo's people will know that He Xia is not that scary. He Xia can bleed, He Xia can be injured too. And there will definitely be a day when He Xia is defeated too.'"

His articulation was very clear, each word both slow and heavy. It entered everyone's ears and entered everyone's brain until it had seeped into everyone's veins.

"My story is very short, this is the end of it. Let me drink some water, I still have to hurry to the next village." He fumbled for a water jug by his feet and lifted it to his lips, drank. He then said, "I heard this story from someone else as well and that someone else heard from someone else too. I don't know how it originated but we all know that it is true. As long as all of you listen to this story and keep it close to your heart, the Main General's bloodshed was not in vain. Don't forget, we still have Main General Ruo Han. Although we don't know where he is right now, sooner or later, he will be like Main General He Xia and oppose He Xia once more.

He struggled up from the ground, grabbing onto his walking stick.

"Sir..." someone called, "What happened to Main General Ze Yin in the end?"

Did He Xia kill him?”

The storyteller shook his head. “Who knows? This story is passed on from person to person. I can only pass on what I have heard to you.” He continued onwards.

From now on, all of Bei Mo’s people knew that He Xia wasn’t scary.

He Xia could bleed.

He Xia could be injured too.

And there would definitely be a day when He Xia was defeated too.

“Will Main General Ruo Han come back to lead soldiers?”

“Can we defeat He Xia? He’s a widely acclaimed general after all.”

“Even if we lose, so what?”

Tiny flickers of light seemed to be hidden in the audience’s crowd. They parted in small groups, until two slender and delicate figures remained behind, quietly standing in their place.

“Yangfeng...”

“He’s still alive.” Yangfeng stood silently for a very long time, stressing each syllable. “He must be alive, alive so he can wait for He Xia to bleed again, be injured. Alive so that he can see the day when He Xia is defeated.” In just a single phrase, her tears began to fall silently and quietly fall.

Pingting reached out a hand to hold onto Yangfeng’s cold and trembling hand.

She didn’t speak.

She was unable to comfort her. She was incompetent at comforting, mainly because Yangfeng was stronger than her. She knew Ze Yin better and understood how to love better.

Two famous generals existed under the heavens. One of them belonged to Yun Chang, the other to Dong Lin.

But Bei Mo didn’t quite have nothing.

Bei Mo had heroes, good men, hot-blooded youths, and unyielding

persistence.

Not just Ze Yin, they had many, many, normal Bei Mo people.

The next day, the news was spread about fifteen miles ahead of the village. The corpse of the storyteller was found, cut into random pieces by sword. The white-haired head had been hung on a trunk, warning all the Bei Mo people who passed on the rumours.

A-Han and a few of the young men in the villagers took advantage of the cover from the night's darkness to steal back his head. They quietly buried it on the hillside outside of the village.

They did not give him a grave, just a cup of yellow mud. Surprisingly, quite a lot of people went to pay their respects to this storyteller whose name was never known.

Among them included Pingting and Yangfeng who took their underaged children too.

It was an autumn day for harvest. The fruit was ripe, the horses were strong, and the sheep were fat.

In insecurity, the common person would unfortunately experience murder, tyranny and opportunity, but at the same time, they also had the opportunity to experience passion and heroic spirits.

After returning from the service, Pingting strode into the room. Without hesitation, she grabbed the sword "Divine Soul" off the wall.

"I don't want you to go out of the mountains for me." Yangfeng reached out to stop her, her eyes so red they seemed ready to cry tears of blood. Her expression however were resolute, "Pingting, don't do anything for others, forcing yourself to do things you don't want to do."

"It's not for you. It's for me." Pingting held the sword in her arms as she slowly turned around, her gaze flickering across her surroundings. She stressed each syllable, "I am going to give up on the stupid resentment and go look for my beloved man, my child's father. I want him to love me, protect me, let my child and me to never be bullied or to be forced, so that we will never have to witness such tragedy again."

Her elegant lips lifted ever so slightly, revealing a beautifully confident smile.

“Yangfeng, I’m just like Ze Yin. This is something I whole-heartedly want to do; this is what my heart wants me to do.” She looked for A-Han, “Mister, you still have a horse hidden right? Could you please lend it to me?”

“Madam Pingting, what do you want the horse for?”

Pingting hugged the sword tighter to herself as she laughed softly. “I want to look for a person, a man who can defeat He Xia. This journey will be very long, that’s why I need your horse. Also, please help Yangfeng to look after my Changxiao.”

Yangfeng saw her good friend’s weak figure and couldn’t bear the heavy pain in her heart. She secretly wiped away her tears, forcefully trying to act calm as she said, “Will you be fine by yourself, amongst all these frenzied soldiers? Where will you go to find the Duke of Zhen Bei who has been missing for so long already?”

“Don’t worry.” Pingting rolled her crystal-like eyes, using her best voice to strongly reply, “I will definitely find him if he is still alive.”

The peasants of Yun Chang’s capital welcomed the glorious return of their Prince Consort with a grand ceremony.

He Xia rode on the leading horse while receiving the cheers of the crowd. Fei Zhaoxing gathered his reins and rode towards him. He didn’t dare ride beside He Xia, so he remained half a horse behind as he whispered, “Prince Consort, once you enter the capital, will you first go to the Royal Residence?”

He Xia shook his head, coldly replying, “What need is there to go to the Royal Residence when Dongzhuo is already waiting for us at the Prince Consort Residence?”

Once he entered the Prince Consort Residence, Dongzhuo was indeed waiting for them inside. He Xia’s power was at its height and Dongzhuo rose up correspondingly. He was practically the manager of all affairs in Yun Chang’s capital now.

He Xia, Fei Zhaoxing and Dongzhuo entered the office. There were no other Yun Chang officials, so they could speak without fear.

He Xia asked, "What have the officials been saying?"

"Yun Chang's officials are temporarily stable, but they are still very grateful towards the Royal House of Yun Chang." Because Dongzhuo stayed behind in the capital to monitor the situation, he knew the officials' actions like the back of his hand.

Fei Zhaoxing said, "It's against Yun Chang's law for the Marquess of Jing-An to become king. No matter how many achievements the Marquess of Jing-An gains, he will never have the blood of Yun Chang's Royal House."

"I've ventured on this topic with some of the most respected officials. With their attitude, they're not too much in favour of establishing a new country or electing a new king," said Dongzhuo.

He Xia's expression was unhappy. He sneered. "They're quite cunning. Several hundred thousands of soldiers are in my hands. If they dare interfere with me, they'll repeat Gui Changqing's mistakes."

"The army's generals are also deeply in favour with Yun Chang's Royal House. I'm afraid Marquess won't get much support on that." Fei Zhaoxing then comforted, "This isn't actually that hard, they're just an interfering bunch of loyal minions. As long as the Royal House disappears, they'll be without support and will immediately allege Marquess. By then, no one would object to a new king succeeding the throne. Country names and titles can be revamped after that."

Dongzhuo listened to Fei Zhaoxing's suggestion and was rather surprised that he meant to get rid of the Princess. He didn't feel much for the Royal House of Yun Chang, but Yaotian treated He Xia like no other. Killing her wasn't quite fair and his expression slightly changed. He lowered his voice, "The Princess has already been told to stay in the Royal Residence and won't pose any threat to us. Why do we have to be so ruthless and kill her? Not to mention, she has Master's flesh and blood in her belly."

Fei Zhaoxing had the skills to see through the civil strife brimming back in Gui Le. He knew inside details and always talked on the best interests of men. He explained, "As long as there are women, why can't you have children? It seems that the Marquess of Jing-An is very glorious indeed, but his footing isn't stable.

He has to succeed the throne and set titles before...”

“Zhaoxing,” He Xia held up a hand as he stood by the window. The start of day had begun. He lowered his voice, “Let’s not argue first. You’ve just returned, so go rest first.”

Fei Zhaoxing was slightly surprised. He glanced at the uncomfortable Dongzhuo and graciously replied, “Fei Zhaoxing shall retire first then.”

He Xia sighed after waiting for Fei Zhaoxing to walk out of the room. He called, “Dongzhuo, you’ve been with me since childhood, so feel free to speak.”

Although Dongzhuo remained in the capital during He Xia’s army’s expedition to all four corners. He heard rumours of the Yun Chang army’s various action and collected a whole stomach load full of words. He wanted to tell them to He Xia when he returned. He wanted to spit it all out, but after He Xia’s question, Dongzhuo’s heart stumbled.

He had grown up in the Jing-An Ducal Residence since young and watched his Master become a criminal pursued by everyone, a genius fallen out of the heaven’s favour. He watched his Master meticulously orchestrate on becoming the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, yet was oppressed by Yun Chang’s government till the point he couldn’t lift his head. He watched him rage and turn the tables in a single assembly, every injustice paid back thrice.

Ups and downs, stumbling. The general who the world feared stood before his eyes. He experienced a very bumpy road and Dongzhuo understood that the most.

Perhaps it was because he had every possible hardship, been hurt too much that He Xia’s tactics today were increasingly violent and vicious, causing even Dongzhuo to be deeply chilled from within.

Dongzhuo raised his head to look at He Xia.

His Master’s figure was handsome, but it felt further and further away, hazy. It was as if dense white mist floated between the two people, pulling apart their distance before their eyes.

“Master,” Dongzhuo’s voice was slightly pleading, “Please forgive and forget. The Gui family got what they deserved, but the Princess is different. Does Master

really not have any feeling towards the Princess in his heart?”

He Xia stiffened. He was silent after hearing Dongzhuo’s words. The cruelty in his handsome face disappeared bit by bit, causing his expression to look a little bit softer.

At that moment, he seemed to be the passionately romantic He Xia in the Jing-An Ducal Residence again.

“In a world of politics and power, where does feeling dwell in?” He turned to look at Dongzhuo who he trusted the most. He Xia, a famous general who had never lost a battle and always pleased of himself, had a bitter smile with a hint of helplessness. “Dongzhuo, you’ve been with me for more than ten years now. Have I always been such a heartless person?”

There was none above him but one. Just a single moving illusion.

The Jing-An Ducal Residence had held military power, a prominent family, but just one Order from the King of Gui Le was enough to destroy all of it and bring his family to ruin and death.

What point was a Prince Consort? Yaotian was a weak woman who didn’t understand military affairs. He actually dared ignore his painstaking efforts by casually dissolving the imminent war between Dong Lin and Yun Chang.

And he had already lost Pingting’s smile and her qin sound. When returning home, he could only see an empty, lonely residence.

He’d had enough punishments...

He Xia closed his two eyes, covering up all of the fatigue and helplessness he felt.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 60

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch60

The sound of hooves shattered the skies in the four countries. The victors bathed in their glory while the defeated fended against even more wounds, the dead not having a complete corpse.

Under all the gold, silver, sweet alcohol, passionate dances and all sorts of pleasuring indulgences, the turmoil below had peasants live in fear and hiding.

There wasn't any damage caused by war for now, because it was an environment too dangerous that even the Yun Chang army considered to be a uselessly dense forest.

Near the Bei Mo desert, there was a forest so densely packed by trees that even sunlight could not filter through and it stretched hundreds of miles. Throughout the year, countless beasts and poisonous bugs lurked in its shadows that belonged to this place.

Even the lumberjacks and hunters who were brought up only dared to use the edge of the woods to make a living. Very few dared to peek into this large, mysterious forest.

Who would remember that there was a mountain in this dense forest?

Mount Dianqing.

The peaks were handsomely steep. Once there a woman who commanded thousands of soldiers sat by the water source, lightly cupping a puddle of water.

The landscape was elegant like her eyes. The mountain's water was sweet like her singing voice.

She was famous for moving the world with her qin skills, those slender fingers.

Yet due to the impending danger at Kanbu City, she was forced to hold onto Bei Mo's military power.

At that time, a soul led the enemy army stationed at the peak, ready to confront her, the world-famous general— the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

The undercurrents, murder, lies, and conspiracy were staged here until, finally, her wish was granted.

And his.

The past incidents no longer existed.

And who knew before their plunge down the cliff, they had once again decided to swear to the moon and ride with sweet joy? When the Cloud Valley Route suddenly snapped, they had done everything to tightly hug onto each other as they fell through the air.

None.

Not one understood.

Why did Duke come?

For you.

But what importance was the fact that no one understood? The wind knew, the clouds knew. The drooping branches of the trees and falling ripe red fruit had all listen and seen.

The moon in the sky witnessed them.

“Let's swear to the moon to never go against each other.”

But if he really did love her so much, how could he turn against her?

How could he?

The wild berries in the valley had a fiery taste; Pingting leaned against the tree, enduring it all.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei who had thundered the world, followed by a complete disappearance, was here.

He had forgotten everything.

He had forgotten Dong Lin, Bei Mo, Gui Le, Yun Chang, military power and the throne. He had forgotten the cheers of admiration from the peasants and the glorious triumph he felt while on a horse.

He only remembered what he lost.

You killed Pingting. You hated her and sent her off to He Xia, so that she died a lonely death in the snow.

Dwindling blossoms and off falls foliage, the drizzles of hurt autumn.

His lofty sentiments and aspirations were now a silent flowing river.

He didn't care about the world's people laughing at the state he had fallen to nor did he care about the glory of being a world-acclaimed general. Because, he lost Pingting.

Pingting, the Jing-An Ducal Residences' Bai Pingting. Her name had spread throughout the world and her story, never left people's mouths.

But only he knew what kind of woman she really was, and how she was so beautiful that it would break his soul.

If there are soldiers, there will be fame;

If there is fame, there will be fraud;

He listened to the most beautiful qin, to the most beautiful song.

Soldiers know fraud,

Soldiers know fraud...

The qin sound was pleasant to the ear like a waterfall of soft black hair that spilled to the ground, like a little stream on a mountain, like the soaring birds in the clouds.

Age slowly passed through his body but thoughts never stopped for a single moment. The mountain wind he breathed reminded him of kissing Pingting's fine hair. His deeply hidden location within the ravines liked the fact of being buried in his memories.

He was still as distraught as the first day he had learned of losing Pingting.

Chu Beijie sat underneath a tree. He didn't know how many days had passed

like this, nor did he know how long he was going to continue like this. The wild plants in the valley flowered all throughout the year, so he didn't have to worry about being hungry. He casually picked one and put it in his mouth. Quite a large number of them were sweet but occasionally there'd be one or two unbearably bitter ones. They seemed to coincide with the pain in his heart, so he just swallowed them without further complaint.

The mountain wind passed through, bringing a bit of coldness into the forest.

The sun disappeared in the west, leaving behind a few reddish clouds. They hid on the other side of the mountain as if a bit hesitant.

Although Chu Beijie was devastated, he still had the bones he used to set fire during childhood, so he wasn't afraid of the cold nor the beasts that came to hunt during the dark of night. He sat against a tree until the bright moon rose, the time when he thought of Pingting the most. His burning heart tore up in immense pain once again.

He stood up from underneath the tree, slowly making his way towards the humble cabin he had put together.

Every day was a simple loop. Even Chu Beijie himself had never thought that he'd destroy his ambitions for a woman and willing be trapped in a mountain forest.

Chu Beijie raised his head. The roughly-made cabin was right before his eyes, standing in the valley, lonely and lifeless like its owner.

Thinking now, he only just realised how precious the days he had spent with Pingting. The times when they gazed at the stars, listened to qin, and admired the snow.

Squeak... The wooden door had no lock. It swung open with a push. The simple furnishings were like usual and entered his eyes one by one.

Then an unexpected colour suddenly leapt into the corner of Chu Beijie's eyes.

Chu Beijie stood by the door, slowly raising his eyes. That elegant colour in his eyes slowly began to collect into a shape in the depths of his eyes, forming a tiny spark. It seemed to wrestle out some of the sharpness in the Duke of Zhen-Bei's gaze, as if erasing the thick dust with a prick.

Delicate, exquisite, demure and silently standing in the room was something like an endless sparkling light. It shone to every direction, rendering those simple table, chair, window into something with colour.

There was only one person, with just a single back view, that could so wonderfully merge heaven and earth.

Chu Beijie stood dazed by the door, light bursting into his eyes. He saw a miracle.

A miracle that he hadn't dare expected to see in his life.

Chu Beijie swore that this was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen in his life.

Pingting, it had to be Pingting...

Apart from Pingting, who else would know of the sadness and joy in the valley underneath the Cloud Valley Route? Who else knew they spent the night together, being so happy in the sweetness that it felt like they would disperse to air?

And who else would understand all that past in this vast, dense forest?

Pingting, only his Pingting.

The Pingting who fell together with him down Cloud Valley Route, the Pingting who cried, laughed, and hugged him in this valley full of wild berries.

The heavens took pity for her soul remained.

Pingting, Pingting, you're finally willing to see me.

Chu Beijie hurriedly took a step forward and abruptly stopped his feet again, holding his breath.

Don't, don't scare her.

If he did, she might instantly become smoke, magically turn into fog, and disappear with the wind.

The once-famous Duke of Zhen-Bei stayed rooted to the spot, feeling helpless. He greedily studied his beloved woman with sparkling eyes but feared a single sound would startle the beautiful sight.

Pingting, you're finally, finally willing to see me.

I would like to apologise to you, for every hint of damage I have given you.

I am willing to give you my everything, my life, death, and honor, to compensate you.

What need is life and death? Just don't let me lose you again.

That is the world's most cruel punishment.

Chu Beijie didn't dare close his eyes to blink. As he stared at that back view, memories of the past surged like an avalanche.

Pain, regret, surprise, gratitude and overbearing love all tumbled into his heart. His chest felt like it was swelling until it instantly broke apart, causing the most courageous general of the battlefield to be unable to restrain himself any longer. He lowered his voice, as if reading out a name that had constantly come back to torture him. "Pingting?"

Is that you?

Is that really you?

The moon is in the sky again. Did you come to see me, because you still remember our oath even though your soul has flown to a place thousands of miles from here?

The back view in the room twitched slightly. Her movements were so graceful like the breeze sweeping the delicate buds of early spring. It was so calm, so gentle. Everything seemed so very much, like an unrealistic dream.

That dreamy face turned towards his eyes, inch by inch. "Duke, you're back?"

It's Pingting, it's really Pingting!

Chu Beijie's black eyes were filled with tears and saw a happy, faintly smiling face.

Her smile revealed that her pale cheeks were a bit haggard, but her gracefulness remained.

She had come.

After numerous painful, heartbreaking thoughts, she came in the end.

The energy he had lost by aging and despair now seemed to pulse in from the soil below into his feet. It grabbed at him, pulling him down till he was almost kneeling right there to thank this dense forest of a hundred miles.

It gave him a miracle, a miracle that belonged to his lifetime.

He sheepishly stood as he stared his most beloved woman, who gracefully ambled towards him.

“Duke, Pingting has come to confess her sins.”

Her voice was beautifully mellow, each word like a pearl scattering into a jade bowl. He thought he went deaf before this.

It had been a long and arduous journey, but what did it matter since all the time had evaporated to smoke?

The Pingting before him was really beautiful, a dream that people would rather not wake from. The Duke of Zhen-Bei who had chilled so many the hearts of so many enemies, didn't even have the courage to raise his hand to lightly touch the figure. He feared that just a single touch of his fingertip would have everything crumble.

Chu Beijie's dark eyes stared at her, moved beyond words.

Why confess?

Isn't the one who needs to beg for forgiveness be me?

“Pingting made a mistake that all women make.” Pingting deeply looked at him, softening her voice, “Pingting made the man who deeply loved her suffer.” The corners of her lips rose, revealing a wry smile. “But, Pingting had her heart broken by Duke too.”

The smile went straight to his heart and the beautiful woman came closer in his eyes.

Pingting pursed her lips as she smiled.

Her smile was just that beautiful. Chu Beijie couldn't stand it any longer, he tentatively reached out to grasp onto Pingting's wrist.

The palm he touched was soft, gentle and warm.

Warm?

Chu Beijie looked in disbelief at the Pingting in front of him. She really didn't look like a ghost. He loosened his grip before carefully clenching her delicate hand once more.

It was warm.

Her creamy skin was very warm, so warm that even the tears Chu Beijie had been holding back for so long, finally began to trickle down.

Alive, she was still alive?

She wasn't a ghost but a living Pingting!

A violent surprised joy shook him even fiercer than a snowstorm, causing Chu Beijie a severe jolt.

"Pingting...Pingting, you're still alive?" He opened his arms, desperately clutching onto her in them.

This real sensation was enough to make anyone weep tears.

Pingting obediently allowed herself to be buried in his arms. She whispered, "Pingting didn't lose her life to the wolf pack. I'm sorry to make Duke worry, is Duke angry?"

"No, no." Chu Beijie vigorously shook his head.

Joy filled every pore of his body.

Why angry? Pingting's alive, she's still alive, she's alive!

This is the happiest thing in the world, so what is there to be angry for?

He felt like happiness merge into his surroundings.

Thank the heavens and the earth, thank the mountains and forests, thank all the world that is tied to the gods for Pingting is still alive!

Chu Beijie reverently murmured, acknowledging and thanking the miracle God had given him.

The familiar scent that only belonged to Pingting wafted into his nose. He clutched onto the slender body in his arms.

It felt like he had lost the ability to speak nor did he know the language to express his inner joy and excitement.

He used every bit of power in his body to feel the Pingting in his arms. He felt every bit of warmth in her petite body, every heartbeat and every tiny movement.

He remained fearful and cautious as he tried to control his trembling arms to embrace his beloved woman.

In this lifetime he would never, never, let go again.

The sun rose from the east in Yun Chang's capital.

After a long night, the Prince Consort finally came to the Royal Residence.

The Royal Residence had gained a number of new treasures, each tribute increasingly beautiful. The rich ornamentation remained befitting to the originals, except all of the guards protecting the Royal Residence had been changed. Each of the new guards had been handpicked from hundreds of others. Every one of them only complied with the Prince Consort, carefully guarding the sole Master of Yun Chang—Princess Yaotian.

“Prince Consort.”

“We bow to the Prince Consort.”

He Xia went passed the various guards, finally reaching the most exquisite and quietest courtyard of the Royal Residence. He raised his head, raising his handsome features.

He saw Yaotian.

In a tower, his pregnant wife was sitting by the window. She was no longer dressed in the complex noble princess dress, substituting it for a simple elegant design and solid coloured. Her silky black hair hung down like a waterfall, relaxing on her shoulder.

Looking at her, He Xia's heart was thrown into a complicated and rather complex feeling.

She was the source of He Xia's military power. When he was suffering, she gave him new hope.

Yet, she was also the restriction of He Xia's military power.

As long as the Yun Chang Royal House had one breath left, He Xia would never be able to convince the Yun Chang army enough to propose the establishment of a new country.

He would never be able to ascend to the throne.

No matter how much territory he conquered, he would only ever be the Prince Consort or the father of the future king.

He would forever have to kneel to his wife, and in the future, he would have to bow towards his own son.

He Xia's heart sank as he slowly climbed the stairs.

"Princess."

Hearing his voice, Yaotian slowly turned around from her seat at the window. Half of her beautiful face was revealed. She whispered, "Prince Consort is finally willing to see me."

He Xia solemnly bowed towards her, took a step forward, and sat opposite of Yaotian. "Has Princess been doing well?"

"I'm fine." Yaotian replied slowly. Her gaze rested on He Xia's soldiers. Her expression changed a bit before instantly turning back to her look of indifference. She asked, "Has Prince Consort been doing well?"

He Xia lowered his head, looking at his own shoulder. He lightly replied, "Ze Yin sent me a letter of challenge. As expected of the highest commander of Bei Mo's army, he actually managed to injure me. Is Princess worrying about me?"

Yaotian replied, "Prince Consort is already the world's most powerful man. Why would I get worried?"

He Xia raised his eyes to briefly meet with her bright eyes. She knew they could not conceal her disappointment and sadness, as well as the hatred he expected.

"Does Princess hate me?" He Xia sighed.

"If I said yes, will Prince Consort kill me? Like killing the Senior Official and everyone else?"

He Xia's handsome face revealed a trace of pity. He straightened and got up, helping Yaotian up as well. "Princess, please stand."

He led Yaotian onto the tower's balcony, overlooking the world.

"Princess, please look. Our horses have travelled throughout the world. There will never be any barriers to stop them. The four countries are now in my pocket, and the promise He Xia made to Princess is about to come true immediately. As my wife and the Princess, do you not feel happy for me?"

Yaotian lowered her eyes. It was a long time before her red lips moved. "Prince Consort, it's true I am supposed to be happy that Prince Consort's men have reached the whole world or am I supposed to be worried about the future of my Yun Chang's Royal House?"

"Princess..."

Yaotian suddenly raised her head, grasping onto He Xia's hand. She softly said, "If Prince Consort really loves Yaotian, please give promise me. Prince Consort, you must give up on establishing a new country. Promise Yaotian that my Yun Chang's Royal House will never disappear in this chain of victorious battles."

She stared into He Xia's eyes with her own, clear and bright. Although Yaotian was forbidden from going outside, she was still the highest ranked member of the Royal House in Yun Chang. She held onto a kingship recognised by all. He Xia couldn't help avoid her eyes at that moment, breaking away from her hand. He turned until his back was facing her and sighed, "Why is Princess' thoughts so narrow? We are husband and wife, even if I become king, Princess will definitely be queen. Both our positions are equally important. Not to mention, Princess is pregnant with my flesh and blood..."

"Prince Consort can't be king." Yaotian stiffened behind him for a moment. Her tone went harder and colder as she emphasised her words, "The child in my belly should be the future king."

He Xia heard her harsher tone. He turned and softened his voice, "Princess..."

"Prince Consort doesn't need to say any more. Please leave." Yaotian interrupted him, stubborn.

He Xia briefly froze.

Yaotian's expression was calm and she stood there, noble and dignified with a pride that oozed from her bones. At that moment, He Xia strangely and deeply felt that his beautiful and gentle wife who he could always impress with his words was indeed the representative on an ancient royal family.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 61

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch61

In the dense forest, a small cabin was filled with joyous vitality.

Although it was very quiet, the joyous air presence was undeniable.

On the wooden bed lied two people, caught by the joy. Perhaps they won't be able to sleep at all that night.

"The stars tonight are particularly bright," Chu Beijie said as he held onto the resurrected Pingting.

Pingting chuckled softly.

"What's funny?"

"Duke finally knows how to speak." She gently smiled and saw Chu Beijie's eyes rest on her face, his eyes so black that the depths couldn't be seen. She couldn't help smile shyly as she murmured, "What is Duke looking at?"

Chu Beijie looked at her for a long time before sighing, "Pingting, you're so beautiful."

Pingting was touched to her heart. She lowered her voice, "Duke is a lot thinner; it's all Pingting's fault."

"It has nothing to do with Pingting. It was something I wholeheartedly wanted to do. I like Pingting; that's why I'm willing to do anything for Pingting, willing to put every minute and second on Pingting."

Pingting was silent before slowly saying, "Men are ambitious, so shouldn't you be focusing on the world?"

“To wholeheartedly do something, remain undaunted by the setbacks, is great ambition itself.” Chu Beijie gently stroked her silky hair as he added, “My ambition is only one, to let you become the happiest woman in the world.”

Pingting raised her head, a pool of water swelling up in her eyes. She whispered, “Does Duke really think that?”

Chu Beijie held up two fingers towards the sky. His face was solemn, “I, Chu Beijie, swear to the skies that the words I just said, every single word, will never be changed, no matter what in this lifetime.”

Pingting was utterly touched as she watched him. The tears in her eyes rippled slightly before sliding down. “Then...Duke, are you willing to do one thing for Pingting?”

Chu Beijie softly replied, “Not just one, even thousands are fine. As long as Pingting desires it, no one will stop Chu Beijie from granting it.”

Pingting raised her eyes, quietly studying the man she loved so dearly. His handsome eyebrows were still very black. His straight nose and thin lips were all very much like in her dreams.

Every tiny gesture of his hand was never once lost from her heart.

This was the man she deeply loved.

Perhaps the deep love she had in this single lifetime would be more than a person would have in three.

The love was deep but so was the pain. They thought they had suffered enough, but like moths to a flame, they had turned back.

She reached out, taking an object out from the bag beside the bed.

“Duke once left this sword in the secluded residence in order to protect Pingting’s safety.” Pingting held the sword with two hands as she slowly asked, “Is Duke willing to use the very same sword to remove the turmoil and unify the four countries, so Pingting can be given a peaceful world to live in?”

Chu Beijie was isolated for so long he had not heard any news about the war. He was stunned. Knowing Pingting’s heart and mind, he knew that she would never make such a request unless it was the very last resort.

“Does Duke not want to?” Pingting’s eyebrows drooped as she softly asked.

“Chu Beijie had spent his whole lifetime in the military. The one thing he was never afraid of was going out to the battlefield to kill enemies. Not to mention, the one who made the request was Pingting, so there was no way he wouldn’t want to. “

He hesitated, breaking into a smile, “Giving wives a cosy and peaceful home is the one thing that all men must do.”

He immediately took the sword, its familiar sensation entering his palm. That day he discarded Divine Spirit at the mourning hall. Today, it returned to its former owner’s hand once more.

As well as its heaviness and coldness, he still remembered every pattern on Divine Spirit. That sword once commanded an army of several thousands of troops and killed any enemy without restriction.

Once it was out of its scabbard, it shook the world.

This was the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s sword.

In Chu Beijie’s eyes, the light of hope for the world began to sparkle.

His sword was in his hand, and the woman he loved returned.

His ambition started.

The dense forest of a hundred miles had given him a miracle, and he had to return the world with another miracle.

He would use this sword in his hand to conquer the world, for the most attractive woman who ever lived.

Although the Royal Residence of Dong Lin was burned, as long as Dong Lin’s Royal House remained alive, the country would never truly fall.

He Xia’s battle had begun. His horse didn’t stop galloping, going everywhere to direct the battle. He always dealt enemies in an organised manner, without hesitation, but when he thought of how to dispose Yaotian, he was very hesitant.

A few days after his return to Yun Chang’s capital, Fei Zhaoxing raised the

matter several times, but He Xia just pushed it back, feeling annoyed. “There’s no hurry right now. Wait until we’re done with the Royal Houses of Dong Lin and Gui Le.”

Fei Zhaoxing repeatedly advised, “Prince Consort, this is currently small and pleasant to deal with, but if it isn’t treated early, I’m afraid that there will be greater suffering in the future.”

There was no way He Xia didn’t know that.

The army crusading around was all under his control, most of them from the Yun Chang army-apart from a few prisoners of war and a few new recruits. If the news of Yaotian being under house arrest were leaked or that Yaotian took the initiative in denying He Xia’s power as lead commander, then it would shake the current situation of victory.

Did he really have to harm his wife and son?

He Xia was distressed over this. His mind wasn’t in battle. He couldn’t smell the familiar scent of blood or the flavour of smoke. Even when facing good alcohol, he seemed to be even more anxious and impatient. Seeing how his expression was so terrible, the other officials in court became alarmed as they weren’t too sure whether they had offended the Prince Consort and feared that the fate of the Gui family would happen to them.

Fortunately a few days later, an army report was sent.

“We have found Royal House of Dong Lin’s hiding place, our troops have already surrounded them.”

“Good!” He Xia smiled, “The Royal House of Dong Lin has been slipping past us for many days. You mustn’t let them escape again. Surround them tightly but don’t attack for now. I will personally deal with them.”

Sending back the messenger, He Xia immediately collected his soldiers and departed. He was attentive to all details and knew the officials of Yun Chang only feared death. They didn’t actually fully surrender to him. He had to be wary, so he ordered Fei Zhaoxing to stay behind and watch over the capital with Dongzhuo.

He hadn’t expected the troops to only travel two hundred miles in less than

three days. Fei Zhaoxing rushed towards them by a fast horse, stopping He Xia and his men.

“Where is the Prince Consort?”

He Xia pulled back the reins, turning back to look. Fei Zhaoxing’s face was full of dust and accompanied by only a few guards. He was immediately alarmed and raised his voice to ask, “Come here, Fei Zhaoxing!”

The crowd of people parted in the middle to lead Fei Zhaoxing to the right place. Once He Xia dismounted, he asked, “What happened at the capital?”

The matter was urgent. Fei Zhaoxing fished out a letter from his arms without even wiping the dust off his face. He looked at He Xia with a very solemn expression as he handed over the letter.

He Xia took the letter, opened it and scanned the first two lines. His expression had already become strange. As he read on, his eyebrows furrowed until they were almost knotted. There was a mask of frost as he lowered his voice, asking, “This is an Order. This...is the Princess’ handwriting?”

His eyes sank so cold it was shocking.

“Yes. I have already had the handwriting checked by specialists. It isn’t an imitation but undoubtedly from the Princess herself.”

He Xia fumed, “Weren’t the Princess’s royal maids not allowed to leave the Princess at all? With all those guards around, how could a royal maid manage to get out? And with a letter too?”

“Please calm down, Prince Consort.” Fei Zhaoxing calmly replied, “This matter has been ascertained already. One of the guards received a bribe and has already been caught. Perhaps because of concern and hidden feelings, he hasn’t exposed any hidden secrets yet. The interrogation is still continuing.”

“Interrogate him carefully.” The depths of He Xia’s eyes was like a sheet of ice, but his facial colour seemed to have restored a little calmness. “Has the maid been interrogated yet? What did she say?”

Fei Zhaoxing replied, “The maid was timid and confessed everything without any real torture used. The Princess wrote this and gave it to her personal maid,

Luyi. Luyi then gave it to her, instructing her to secretly give it to Official Zhang Yin and then Official Zhang Yin to some other officials to read.”

“Some other officials?” He Xia sneered, “Which officials don’t want their lives I wonder. Where’s the list?”

Fei Zhaoxing bent down respectfully, “Official Zhang Yin must have the list in his hands. Before leaving the capital, I have already sent men to secretly arrest Zhang Yin. He is currently being tortured. At the same time, this matter is no trivial one. One that mustn’t be known by others. That’s why Dongzhuo was left behind to guard the capital while I came to chase Prince Consort.”

He worked fast, treated everything appropriately and was quite a flexible solver. He Xia couldn’t help but glance at him with appreciation.

Fei Zhaoxing’s report had finished. He hesitated before continuing in a low voice, “Prince Consort, please immediately come back to the capital. Currently the Dong Lin Royal House isn’t important but Yun Chang’s capital. The Princess has already made her move. If they really do find out the truth, the situation will be too difficult to deal with. Those civil service officials are quite timid. They’re nothing to fear about, but the Princess is still the sole Master of Yun Chang. No one else but Prince Consort dares to deal with the Princess.”

“The Princess personally penned this Order, wanting all of the officials to secretly prepare to strip me of my right to lead the troops in one sweep...” He Xia looked down at the Order in his hand, his rage rising again. His fingers closed in, crushing the Order in his palm. He softly grinded his white teeth and became silent for the longest time. Slowly, the colour returned to his face. “Does the Princess know about this?”

“In theory, she shouldn’t. The maid was caught on the way to Official Zhang Yin. Since the Princess is in the Royal Residence, guarded by a huge number of guards, no one should be able to talk to the Princess or her royal maids.”

He Xia nodded, “You and I will immediately return to the capital. This matter mustn’t be delayed; we must immediately destroy the source of trouble.”

Fei Zhaoxing heartily nodded, “Exactly.”

Without further ado, He Xia made his choice. He immediately picked out half of

the troops to return with him to the capital, leaving the other half to continue travelling with the one general chosen by him. He commanded, “When you get to Dong Lin, pass on my Order. Immediately attack and surround the Dong Lin Royal House. The Queen who holds all of Dong Lin’s power must be caught alive as my trophy. The others don’t need to live.”

Once the Order was laid out, he and Fei Zhaoxing immediately galloped towards the government.

The group didn’t stop galloping, heading for the capital day and night. Once they got through the city gates, Fei Zhaoxing lowered his voice to ask, “Prince Consort, will you first go to the Royal Residence?”

He Xia shook his head, “We’ll go to the Prince Consort Residence first.”

Once they arrived at the Prince Consort Residence, he asked about the situation. Zhang Yin hadn’t been able to last the torture early on, giving up the confidential list of officials he was supposed to contact.

He Xia took over the list, skimmed through it and raised his voice to summon a general he could trust. He ordered, “Immediately send an Order from the army. Just say Gui Le assassins have sneaked into the capital. Issue a curfew so that no one is to freely walk around on the streets.”

Once the Order for a curfew had been set, he then spoke to Dongzhuo. “Most of the civil officials on the list are in the capital. There is no need to worry for now. Use the curfew as an excuse to send troops to guard them in their own homes. Be careful to choose ones that won’t spill the beans.”

Dongzhuo acknowledged He Xia’s instructions before hurriedly leaving to personally make the arrangements.

“There is one thing I want you to immediately do.” He Xia turned his head to look at Fei Zhaoxing, “My favoured generals are trust me quite a bit. If Yun Chang is going to change, many people will chose to support me except for General Shang Lu, in charge of military vehicles. Shang Lu’s family has been looked after by the Yun Chang Royal House for generations. His loyalty is blind and old-fashioned. If I really do ascend to the throne, he will be the first to oppose me in the army.”

Having said that much, Fei Zhaoxing understood what he wanted. “Please give your instructions, Prince Consort.”

“Shang Lu is currently stationed at Bei Mo. I’ll write a military Order, to have him launch an attack against Gui Le. Find a chance for a confrontation with Gui Le’s General Le Zhen. You take the Order and personally go to Bei Mo to announce it. Lead your Weibei Regiment to destroy Le Zhen’s army with Shang Lu. For this battle, Shang Lu will be vice while you will be the main general. Do you know what to do?”

Fei Zhaoxing’s train of thought was always clear. He nodded, “The general will die in battle and become a legend of ten years. When the two armies clash, casualties are inevitable. As a general of Yun Chang, Shang Lu’s death is normal. Rest assured, Prince Consort.”

He Xia rapidly churned out two military Orders. One of them was to be handed to Shang Lu, the other to Fei Zhaoxing’s position as main general during the battle for Gui Le. He put down the pen and faintly smiled, “Shang Lu must be dealt with, and Le Zhen can’t be missed either. Our military power is enough with this confrontation, but I’m just afraid that you and Le Zhen’s relationship as former master and servant will cause a brief moment of hesitation.”

Fei Zhaoxing respectfully took the military Orders. He replied, “I put my life at risk for the Le family yet fell to the state where I had to cook dead dogs for food. What is the significance of a relationship as former master and servant? Le Zhen’s skill is mediocre, only becoming a general with the accomplishments of his elders. I will definitely crush him, overwhelmingly.” While carefully tucking the Orders in his sleeves, he lowered his voice again, “Prince Consort, the Royal Residence...”

He Xia cut off his words, “About the Royal Residence, I will deal with them. You go.”

Once Fei Zhaoxing was sent off, the ornate office suddenly quietened.

He Xia stood by himself for a long time, taking the Princess’ letter from his sleeves. A few days ago, he wrung the letter while feeling incredibly annoyed. It became unbearably wrinkled. He laid the letter out on the table, slowly flattening it as he re-read it again. His expression was like calm water, without ripples, but

his eyes held a sharp light. Underneath those tiny sparks, no one knew exactly how many complex thoughts lay hidden.

Once Dongzhuo finished instructing, he hurried back. He only took one step into the office before seeing He Xia's back. Feeling a bit startled, his other foot remained posed outside the door, not yet inside the room.

He Xia's back seemed to be made up of concentrated worry. His large body seemed as heavy as mountains as if using all of the energy in one's body wouldn't be able to make him budge in the slightest.

"Is that Dongzhuo? Come in."

Dongzhuo was frozen at the door and only stepped inside after hearing He Xia's words. He slowly walked towards the table until he was standing beside He Xia. He lowered his head and was surprised to see the Order Princess Yaotian wrote. Naturally he knew what was written on it and his heart sighed. He lowered his voice to ask He Xia, "How does Master plan to deal with the Princess?"

"All of you are asking the same difficult problem." He Xia's smile was bitter. He pursed his lips, making him look even colder than usual. "If this letter was successfully sent out to the various officials while I was outside the capital, the moment their plans succeed and the Princess is rescued, the army of Yun Chang's morale would shake."

"Master..."

He Xia ignored Dongzhuo's words; he continued to whisper, "If the Princess were to re-appear before the people, she will have a better grasp in the situation. No matter how many achievements I have in war, how many victories won, how many unimaginable victories, the soldiers of the Yun Chang army would gradually leave me because my opponent is Yun Chang's one and only master. Soldiers and peasants don't know how to choose men of talent. They only know stupid loyalty and allegiance to the Royal House."

He Xia's every word seemed to be cut out from ice. Dongzhuo listened which made his whole body shiver. His lips twitched, wanting to open, but he felt as if his lips had been frozen to ice and was unable to say anything.

Indeed, if Yaotian successfully got back the throne, He Xia would suffer a crushing defeat. A shocking Order would be written, sentencing the Prince Consort to death due to his betrayal by attempting to establish a new country.

The air in the office began to clot. Even fresh air could not blow apart this chill brought by power struggles.

“Say, do you think the Princess really likes me?” He Xia suddenly turned to one side.

Dongzhuo took a while processing the question before he plucked up his courage. “Master, the Princess wrote such an Order only because she wanted the Yun Chang Royal House to survive. The situation forced her heart because in her heart...in her heart...”

He Xia looked at Dongzhuo. He suddenly smiled gently, “In her heart, she doesn’t actually want to kill me, right?”

Dongzhuo looked at He Xia’s smile, instantly feeling terrified. At first he wanted to nod, but he struggled for a long time before finally dragging out a sigh. He reluctantly said the truth, “Master is right. If Princess really does regain the throne, even if the Princess doesn’t want to, she will certainly be pressured by the other officials to sentence Master to death.”

He Xia was indeed worried about this matter. The words of truth were like needles that pricked until He Xia’s heart had sores. Dongzhuo said it, no longer caring about the possibly dire consequences. He did not know what He Xia’s reaction would be so he lowered his eyes, not daring to look at him.

A long time passed when he heard a faint sigh overhead.

He Xia said, “I will prepare a gift and go to the Royal Residence to see the Princess.”

In Bei Mo, about eighty miles to the right of Kanbu City, there was a settlement known as Jiangling Ancient City.

It was an abandoned ancient city; most of the walls had collapsed.

Yellow sand filled the horizon.

“Main General, have some water.”

The subordinate's water was a muddy yellow. Jiangling Ancient City's environment was perilous. Water and other resources were seriously inadequate. But it was remote. The secret tunnels in the city reached everywhere so even if the attention of the Yun Chang army was caught, escaping was possible.

Ruo Han took the spoon and drank a small sip. He handed it to the soldiers by his side, "Drink some."

Bei Mo's official military force had been defeated by He Xia in the Battle of Zhouqing. Ruo Han managed to escape with his life and collected the remnants to resist He Xia two or three times, but as the opposition was a famous general, each attempt ended in failure.

The difference between their strengths were far too great, whether it was the number of troops, ability of generals or military power. All were far less than their opposition. Being able to protect his own life and the group of soldiers around him was not easy.

Even so, everyone there had not once thought about surrendering to He Xia.

The soldiers beside him looked up at the burning sky. They suddenly asked, "Main General, how many people do you think General Senrong will bring back?"

"Quite a few," Ruo Han replied, his heart swelling a little.

He thought of his former boss, the greatest general of Bei Mo, Ze Yin.

Ever since the story of Main General Ze Yin's open challenge to He Xia, the number of peasants that secretly requested to join the rebel army were growing.

No one knew in the end how the story started, but everyone knew that it was true.

He Xia could bleed and there would definitely be a day when He Xia would be defeated too. That was how Main General Ze Yin put it.

As long as dreams are not forgotten, fighting spirits still exist. Even in threat of death, the steady stream of future generations would never despair as they pursue.

This time, Senrong would definitely bring back many more passionate young

men.

“Main General, General Senrong has returned!” The sentinel vigorously waved.

Ruo Han abruptly got up, gazing into the distance. Far away, a few horses quickly riding appeared as expected. They headed towards the ancient city.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s the General Sen Rong all right.” The sentinel affirmed, but his tone sounded doubtful as he added, “Strange, why so few this time?”

Ruo Han was curious about the same thing.

Due to Main General Ze Yin’s action, the number of people who secretly enlisted were growing by the day, yet why did Sen Rong only bring back a selected few? Could it be that something went wrong?

Sen Rong’s horse came in at the speed of light, reaching the city in a few moments. He waved at the sentinel and the soldiers hurriedly let them inside the city.

Ruo Han strode towards the city entrance towards Sen Rong who just dismounted. He asked, “What’s going on? That’s all the new soldiers you got?”

Sen Rong reached for the water his subordinates brought forward. He didn’t care about its muddiness. He raised his head to drink the entire spoon. “There were a lot of new recruits, but I didn’t bring them.”

“Why not?”

“It’s easy to get three enemies, but hard to get a single general. Well...” Sen Rong’s heart definitely held happiness. The joy on his face couldn’t be controlled, and his face couldn’t help break into a grin.

“Don’t tell me you were able to find a general in a single trip?”

“Not just a general but more like a god! A general who can definitely defeat He Xia.”

Ruo Han heard his irresponsible remarks and his eyebrows wrinkled.

He Xia was a world-acclaimed general and deserved the title. He wondered who on earth was able to put himself on the same platform and say that he

could definitely beat He Xia.

The soldiers of today had become much thinner, and the environment was harsh, shaking morale immensely. Sen Rong had always been careless. How on earth did he know? He could not take his words back once they were out of his mouth or else it would destroy the morale. He couldn't help whisper, "Sen Rong, stop speaking nonsense. You've fought against He Xia. You know his strength. How is it even possible to have a general who can definitely beat He Xia? Unless..." Ruo Han abruptly stopped, sighing instead.

He thought of Bai Pingting.

Back then, her eloquence during the Battle of Kanbu was still in the depths of his memory, as if carved in by a knife.

During the Battle of Zhouqing, He Xia's strategy had been evil and unpredictable. Only Lady Pingting's piece at the edge of Kanbu, forcing back Chu Beijie's army of a hundred men in such tranquillity, could be compared to it.

Unfortunately, that beauty was gone.

Ruo Han pondered many times of the result if Pingting was the main advisor during the Battle of Zhouqing.

"Don't sigh, Main General. Come, come, I have something for Main General to see." Senrong laughed, taking a step forward. He untied his bag from his back. He pulled Ruo Han to one side as he opened it. He warned, "Main General, be careful. This treasure is quite dazzling, so do protect your eyes."

Ruo Han saw his high spirits. He couldn't help feel a bit strange as he patiently waited for him to open the bag. At first look, it was only a few muddy red, black or blue dyed cloths. There was even a few old stains of sweat and blood but when he looked even closer, it felt like his cheeks were drawn to it like a magical hold. He just stared at the opened bag, no longer able to move.

Senrong had long expected his reaction. He triumphantly asked, "What do you think?"

Ruo Han widened his eyes, staring at that bag. Others may not be able to tell but he could. Those old clothes were the cloaks the Bei Mo generals gave to Pingting in order to express their gratitude and loyalty after the Battle of Kanbu.

The bloodstained cloaks to these generals were full of meaning to themselves. They would only ever offer their cloaks when they felt inexpressible reverence. That bag contained Ze Yin's, Senrong's and Ruo Han's own...

It was a while before Ruo Han finally reacted. His entire body trembled with excitement. "This...this...Sen Rong," he stretched out his hands, tightly grabbing onto Senrong. He stuttered out, rather incoherently, "You mean, don't tell me, Miss Bai, she...she didn't die?"

Senrong was very pleased. At first he wanted to tease Ruo Han a bit, but seeing his excitement, he couldn't help but push the thought down. He immediately nodded, loudly replying, "That's right, Miss Bai didn't die. She's still alive."

"Alive..." Ruo Han's eyes lit up, "Then where is she?" Since being promoted to Main General, he had become even more attentive to details than before. He immediately turned, his gaze falling on the other people Sen Rong returned with.

One of the figures was particularly petite. She didn't hide even when seeing Ruohan's gaze. She raised her delicate hand to lift the big hat that veiled her face. "General Ruohan, long time no see."

Her smile was exquisite, charming her surroundings.

At that moment, who else could possibly compare to that calm elegance apart from Bai Pingting?

Ruohan stayed rooted to the spot, staring at Pingting for a time long enough to burn a whole incense stick before slowly lifting a foot to walk towards Pingting. He slowly adjusted himself, slowly straightening his back, as if still not quiet believing Pingting was in front of his eyes. He finally let out a long breath and with great feeling, commented, "Ruohan finally understands what is called a gift from the heavens."

Pingting chuckled lightly, "Main General, don't be so quick to thank the heavens. This time Pingting has come to oppose He Xia's Yun Chang army, but to do this she must collect her old debt."

Ruohan saw Pingting's long-lost smile, inspiring like the spring breeze. His confidence rose. He broke into a smile, "Ruohan is willing to offer his life to return My Lady's help during the Battle of Kanbu. Ahh, even if you didn't have

these cloaks or helped during Kanbu, as long as My Lady is willing to oppose He Xia, there is nothing I can't give My Lady."

"That's good..." The light in Pingting's eyes shifted slightly as she breezily said, "Pingting boldly asks Main General to grant Pingting's wish."

"Please say it, My Lady."

"Pingting brought a person that I hope all of Main General's men will be loyal to him and listen to his orders. No matter who this person is, Main General must acknowledge him as the main advisor. Does Main General approve?"

Ruohan was stunned. "Who on earth has such capability that My Lady is willing to give him the rights to being the Main General?"

Pingting pursed her lips as if in thought. It wasn't long before she smiled again. She softly sighed, "The battlefield situation is urgent and soldiers must know fraud. I wanted Main General to agree before saying it. Oh well, I'll let Main General know who it is before considering whether to agree to Pingting's request or not." The light in her eyes flickered to the side as she gently called, "Duke."

At this, Ruohan felt like his head had been fiercely struck by lightning, suddenly causing his world to spiral out of control.

No way, it couldn't be...

His gaze gradually moved over.

The tall man beside Pingting removed his veiled hat, revealing an angular face. His eyes were tiger-like in spirit and when they met with Ruohan's, he smiled. "That late night attack in the barracks was really just my desire to look for my wife. If Chu Beijie has offended Main General, please do forgive me."

That tall figure, immovable as a mountain, was the Duke of Zhen-Bei who had been missing for so long.

Shock waves hit him, each one stronger than the last. Ruohan had many experiences, but at that moment, even he felt stunned. He stared at Chu Beijie for ages as if seeing his prodigal son.

Of the two renowned generals, apart from He Xia, the other was still alive.

He was still mighty and still had that look of confidence beyond measure.

“Is Main General willing to throw away the hatred between Dong Lin and Bei Mo to follow the Duke and oppose He Xia?” Pingting’s voice seemed to travel from far away, leaving bounce after bounce of gentle echoes.

Ruohan’s eyes gradually focused, stopping on Chu Beijie’s face. This person had once led troops to invade and almost destroy Bei Mo. He was the very same person who snuck into the barracks and toyed around with him until he had tricked them all into giving Main General Ze Yin’s whereabouts.

But this person was indeed the only general who could oppose He Xia in the world.

“Main General?” Senrong appeared behind him at some unknown time. He lightly pushed him.

Ruohan was startled, his senses returning. Pingting and the other generals all had their gazes pinned on him. When he raised his head, he saw the soldiers who followed him pop out from all over the city, straining their necks to see the famous Chu Beijie.

Everyone held their breath, waiting for his reply.

Ruohan raised his head, loudly asking, “Soldiers, you’ve seen it all. This man is Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei, the Chu Beijie who had almost destroyed our Bei Mo. Today he is before us, wanting us to follow him to oppose He Xia’s army. Tell me, should I refuse him?”

The surroundings were silent, not even a cough could be heard.

Ruohan asked again, but he was answered with silence once more.

“Fine...” Ruohan looked around, “I understand.” He then looked at Chu Beijie, lowering his voice, “The Royal House of Bei Mo has already been butchered by He Xia while Bei Mo’s territory is currently happily trampled on by the army of Yun Chang. It’s the most stupid thing to continue to hate Dong Lin at this moment. Whoever can defeat He Xia and save all the peasants of this place, I will acknowledge him as main advisor and will follow him onto the battlefield.”

Chu Beijie smiled faintly. His elbow was tugged before he heard a sonorous

voice echo in his ear.

Under the hot sun, the famous Divine Soul sword's cold light radiated in all four directions. The Duke of Zhen-Bei's sword was unsheathed.

"I will defeat He Xia and save all peasants of this place. Soldiers, who is willing to follow me?"

Everyone listened to his deep voice, hidden with power.

The surroundings were even quieter than before.

"Who is willing to follow me, Chu Beijie?" Chu Beijie raised his voice, asking loudly.

Pingting slowly raised her head, her gaze lightly sweeping across the dusty faces.

"Me." A soft sound was heard in the crowd.

"Me." Said another sound.

"Me!" Someone yelled loudly.

"Me, I'm willing!"

"Me!"

"Me, me too!"

"Me!"

"Me!"

The echoes were like thunder as the crowd burst into wave after wave of roaring.

To follow the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Following the old enemy of Bei Mo, following this man who expelled despair from the earth, following this famous general who could defeat He Xia.

Their King was dead, the Royal Residence destroyed. The hearts were trampled on, and their parents were now being tortured by cavalry units.

But all they needed was fighting spirit, the courage to never succumb, to not be afraid of letting blood fall onto the yellow mud, rusty weapons and elderly

horses.

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei!”

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei! Defeat He Xia!”

“Defeat He Xia! Defeat He Xia! Drive away the Yun Chang army...”

Jiangling Ancient City seemed to be teeming.

Every young face, covered in dust, dirt, blood, and wounds, was excited, full of smiles and hot tears.

Ruohan widened his eyes, trying to stop his touched tears from falling. He placed a hand at the sword on his waist. He took a step forward and declared, “I, Ruohan, swear to my sword that from now on, I am no longer Main General Ruohan of Bei Mo. I am the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s General Ruohan! Duke of Zhen-Bei, please remember your promise too.”

“I will defeat all people who cause loss of life, including He Xia.” Chu Beijie solemnly replied. His gaze shifted to Pingting, turning extremely gentle, “Because I promised my most beloved woman I would give her a peaceful world to live in.”

Pingting never thought Chu Beijie would display such affection before this massive crowd. Even though there was thunderous applause from all around, Chu Beijie’s gentle words were heard by Ruohan, Senrong and a few other acquaintances standing nearby. Pingting instantly reddened, not knowing how to reply. She lowered her eyes and barely managed to restore her usual calm appearance. She advised, “The morale is rising, so you should raise the important matters quickly. This is the first army Duke has formed since returning. Perhaps an official name should be given? For example...Zhen-Bei army.”

Her words held another meaning. This time each country’s troops had been slain, attacked by Yun Chang. These soldiers under Chu Beijie weren’t just Dong Lin any more. That meant he could no longer use that name or national pride would tatter the soldiers’ hearts.

Chu Beijie led troops for many years so he obviously knew what Pingting meant. He laughed as he nodded, “True, we do need to give it a name.”

He held up his sword to the sky, shouting, “All soldiers and generals, be quiet for a moment. I have something to say!”

With just one word, everyone silenced immediately. Everyone was full of anticipation as they looked at this invincible general.

“From today on, we will be the army that will oppose He Xia.” Chu Beijie slowly said, “This army will not be called the Zhen-Bei Army, the Beijie Army nor Dong Lin Army. We will be known as the Ting Army!”

Pingting softly gasped, looking at Chu Beijie in disbelief.

“Some of you may ask why it’s called Ting Army.” Chu Beijie’s strong shoulders suddenly reached out, pulling the petite Pingting into his arms. Chu Beijie raised his voice, “Because my most beloved woman is called Bai Pingting. I promised her I will sweep away her panic and unify the four countries so that she has a comfortable world to live in. I challenge He Xia because I want to protect Pingting, protect the most precious thing in my, Chu Beijie’s, life.”

“Dear soldiers, you follow me not because of power, wealth, land, nor for dominance or ambition, nor is it a forced Order. It’s isn’t for me, Chu Beijie either.”

“Then why on earth do you run the risk of following me?”

“Because, aren’t you all the same as me, Chu Beijie?”

“In order to protect your loved ones, you go through bloodshed. You get hurt for your injured ones; you give up your life to get your wish.”

“Tell me, you are the same as me!”

“Tell me, soldiers of the Ting Army, you will never forget why you are called the Ting Army!”

“Tell me, soldiers of the Ting Army, that you will never forget the people you love, never forget the things you cherish the most! Never forget why you are fighting!”

“Tell me in a loud voice, what is this army called?” Chu Beijie’s voice rang out in the ancient city, into the clouds in the sky.

After a moment of silence, roars broke out.

“Ting Army!”

“Ting Army! Ting Army!”

“Ting Army!”

The entire Jiangling Ancient City was roaring, shaking.

Pingting remained in Chu Beijie’s warm embrace, her hot tears silently dripping onto Chu Beijie’s chest.

Senrong walked over. “The Duke of Zhen-Bei is the world’s most powerful lover,” he admired.

“I don’t know about being the most powerful lover,” Ruohan sighed, “but I’m certain he is the one general who understands how to boost an army’s morale the best.”

Translation Notes:

- “Two fingers”: A gesture for a very formal oath. Imagine the peace sign, but the two fingers are touching. When swearing to God, heavens etc, your palm is away from you and the upright fingers point straight up to the sky.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 62

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch62

In Yun Chang, the pavilions were still like always.

The sun had already set.

Yaotian sat on the royal chair, quietly looking out over the Royal Residence. She stroke the curtain that trembled companionless in the wind. Only half of the rouge she'd put on remained as she stood in the front of the mirror, lonely.

He Xia passed through the many guards on the main path of the Royal Residence and into the inner corridor. The paths became more and more narrow as he went, finally stopping at the quietest corner. A large, heavy lock tightly shut the wooden door to the small building in front of him.

Princess Yaotian and her personal maid, Luyi, were imprisoned there.

“Prince Consort.” Only the guards who He Xia trusted the most were assigned to guard the wooden door. The captain of the guards approached, greeting He Xia. He carefully asked, “Would Prince Consort like us to open the door to go in?”

He Xia's raven black eyes slowly eyed the locked door.

Yaotian was inside.

She was his wife, the mother of his unborn child, the gentle, kind, smiling and persuasive princess. The sole Master of Yun Chang who personally wrote an Order, commanding him to be put to death, accusing him of betrayal.

He stared at the lock on the door, as if it didn't just lock up the door but his heart. He stood there, silent for a long time, before shaking his head. “I'm not going in. Don't tell anyone I came. Hand this inside and tell the Princess that I saw her Order. Zhang Yin had been secretly taking care of. This is my return gift.

That Miss Fengyin, the one Princess presented me, helped me make it.”

The guards answered, carefully taking the pretty box from He Xia’s hands. The guard walked to the front of the door, took out a key, opened the door and entered.

The instant the door was opened, He Xia raised his head to look inside. In that fleeting moment, he could see nothing.

Not long later, the door opened from inside. The captain of the guards got out, carefully locking the door again. He approached He Xia to report, “The gift has been delivered. Every word Prince Consort said was delivered, not one word more...”

“Ah!” A sudden panicked scream was heard inside the room.

The frightened scream was completely off tune. Those familiar with Yaotian’s voice knew it was the Princess’ scream.

Those who were picked to guard the Princess were no ordinary people, but listening to her scream, almost all of the guards – including the captain himself – couldn’t help but shudder.

After the scream, there seemed to be a thud as something heavy fell onto the purple and golden tiles.

Everyone expected Yaotian had opened the box and was shocked by the contents inside. But what on earth had the Prince Consort given cause such desperate fear?

While the guards’ expressions were frightened, He Xia’s calm expression was even more terrifying.

Only he knew what that box held.

The box contained a treasure. At least, once upon a time, the Princess and Gui Changqing had both treasured.

They thought she could play qin songs as beautiful as Pingting, qualified to touch everything He Xia had attentively prepared for Pingting. She took Pingting’s comb, slept on the linen Pingting once slept on, and touched the qin Pingting played.

In He Xia's eyes, there was no way that was a treasure. It was a torture weapon against He Xia.

Every qin sound from the Prince Consort Residence came from those sharp fingernails. Those two hands each clawed through He Xia's heart viciously.

Fengyin's two qin playing hands, rather than growing on its master, might as well be cut off and presented, bloody, in a box as a gift.

The Marquess of Jing-An returned all of the past humiliation and torture back to its original owner.

"Princess! Princess! What's wrong? Princess!" Luyi's voice came in fragments, trembling through the wooden door.

It rang out.

The people outside strained their ears, paying attention to the movements inside. Luyi called a few times, suddenly stopped for some reason. The inside of the room instantly quietened like death. A moment passed before Luyi started to scream again. "Someone! Someone come!"

"Someone come! The Princess has been frightened! Call the physician! Quickly call the physician!"

"Mister Guard, Mister Guards outside! I beg you, please go find the Prince Consort!"

"Princess...Princess...oh god, blood!" The wooden door suddenly began to sound, perhaps from being strongly hit by something. The guards jumped back in shock. There was someone's nails clawing messily from inside. "Blood, blood! Someone! Someone! Someone come..." Luyi cried out.

The guards felt rather scared thanks to her frantic calls. They stole a look at He Xia.

He Xia listened to Luyi's calls and instructed, "You may all leave. Without my permission, no one is to come."

The guards listened to the calls that was enough to give nightmares. They were dying to leave. The area was immediately wiped clean of people.

"Physicians, I beg you all, please go call the physician. Who, just who can..."

Luyi kept on crying inside. The sounds of several collisions were heard as if she had gone back to Yaotian's side, knocking over several tables and chairs.

Bang!

The pot that held water spilled onto the ground.

"Princess, Princess, you're awake?" Luyi's voice was a little more collected. "Princess, are you all right? You scared me to death..."

"Luyi, it hurts..." That was Yaotian's voice.

A brief moment of silence.

"Blood, all this blood, why..." Yaotian's weak yet frightened voice came again.

"Princess, Princess! Don't move...someone come! Save her! The Princess has been frightened into early labour, someone!" Luyi started to cry out again, even more piercing to the heart than before. "Prince Consort, please come quickly Prince Consort! The Princess is having early labour! Princess...Princess will die..."

The sparks in He Xia's eyes began to flare up and burn, unextinguishable.

"Princess, Princess! Save her, save the Princess! I beg you to open the door! We need a physician, even a few herbs is fine!" The wooden door thudded ever so loudly as Luyi maniacally thumped the door, shouting at the very top of her hoarse voice.

"I beg you all, I beg you all! The Princess is having early labour! Physician, physician!"

"Prince Consort, Prince Consort, you are so cruel..."

Prince Consort, Prince Consort.

The Prince Consort of Yun Chang. There was none above him but one.

The one to coldly glance at everyone, but with a gentle lift of his lips, the maiden sitting on the throne was instantly captured out of the clouds.

The two had come together, despite their differences.

In the atrium well decorated with flowers, passion hid.

Remembering the wedding, he removed the coronet from her head. Yaotian

sighed, "It's the night of the wedding chamber, and the man in front of me is talented both literarily and militarily, a true hero. It's just like a really good dream, so I'm a little afraid that it's just a dream."

Her smile in the candlelight seemed to be printed in his mind, like the reddish glow after a drink.

Princess, my wife. It wasn't a dream, but a nightmare.

Only one could be true, and it was a nightmare that no one could escape from.

"Help! Someone come save the Princess...I beg you all...I beg you..." Luyi's heartbreaking voice echoed in his ear.

He Xia's handsome face twisted, a sudden burst of iciness in his palms. He abruptly lowered his head, only then realising he had grabbed a hold of the lock on the door at some point. He was surprised and immediately took a small step back, standing still once more.

"Someone come, save her! I beg you, save the Princess..."

"Prince Consort, you mustn't be so cruel. I beg you, Prince Consort, the Princess is dying..."

Luyi's rapidly diminishing voice continued to wail, "Even if you kill the Princess, does Prince Consort not want his own flesh and blood anymore? I beg you, Masters outside, please, please pass the message to the Prince Consort!"

Kill the Princess?

He Xia shook his head. No, he had never thought about killing her. He only thought of seizing all military power and take her throne, but never thought once about killing her.

Why did he have to kill her when she was his wife for this lifetime, his future queen. He once said to make the Princess become the noblest woman in the world.

He didn't want to harm her, he really didn't. But his wife wrote an Order, gathering up Officials to punish him. The letter had been concise and straight to the point, clearly stating that in the future, he would be sentenced to death.

Almost, just a little bit more, perhaps the one being locked up would be

himself. The one bleeding would be him and the one being hacked to pieces would be him!

A nightmare, this was a nightmare.

The sound of Yaotian's screaming was sandwiched between Luyi's crying.

"Ah...ahhh! Luyi, I'm not going to make it....ah!"

"Princess, the physician...will soon...will soon come here..."

"No no, I don't want the physician. I want the Prince Consort...the Prince Consort..."

"Princess..."

"Hurry, find someone to call the Prince Consort over. Make him come here..."

Luyi let out her voice to cry, "Princess, the Prince Consort he..."

"Luyi, I want to see him...I won't make it. I want to see him. Hurry, he won't be able see me..."

Yaotian's weak voice was scattered, but it still had indescribable devotion.

Princess!

The He Xia who had been standing outside the door like a clay statue suddenly jerked a few times. He stumbled towards the door, his five fingers tightly enclosing around the cold and heavy metal lock.

Cold and heavy.

This was the lock on his heart, the lock on his life.

As long as the Princess remained, the matter of the Order, would continue over and over again. Nothing could change this outcome.

He Xia held onto the lock, his sweat merging with the metal, making his palms both wet and cold.

Yaotian was still moaning, "Prince Consort, go find the Prince Consort for me... he wouldn't refuse to see me...go find him...ah! It hurts so much..."

The hand He Xia had around the lock suddenly began to violently shake.

Princess, Princess, I can't see you.

You are He Xia's wife, He Xia's one and only wife in this lifetime.

I don't hate you for letting Gui Changqing secretly try to control me. I don't hate you for making me lose Pingting. I don't hate you.

I just hate the skies, hate this nightmare, hate that you had to write an Order to sentence me to death and hate everything that made me unable to protect you.

Hot tears began to drip down his face, twisted with pain.

He Xia touched the lock on the door and listened to Yaotian's cries and calls for him. His knees helplessly caved in.

Early next morning, a grave and solemn funeral was held, startling the peasants who were planning to work through another long day.

Far away, the Yun Chang Royal Residence seemed white, particularly desolate.

The peasants heard of the sad news. The pregnant Master of Yun Chang had gone into early labour due to her weak body. She died in the arms of the heartbroken Prince Consort.

What they didn't know was that very same night, several of the officials in the court had been secretly executed for various reasons.

It was a dark night in Dong Lin. Even the stars were silent.

Moran hid himself in the forest as he stared warily at the flickering sparks in the distance.

The sparks seemed to blot out the sky, forming an arc, tightly surrounding this patch of mountain forest they hid in.

Arrows were on strings, posed yet not firing.

This critical situation had been going on for several days. The final bit of strength of the Royal House of Dong Lin had been trapped, unable to move. Both ally and enemy sides understood that this calmness was simply a false impression before the bloodshed to follow.

The bushes beside him began to rustle.

"Who knows when He Xia is going to come?" Luoshang carefully came over

until he was right beside Moran. He too stared out at the enemy that surrounded him for several days.

Moran whispered, "Even if He Xia came out from the capital of Yun Chang, he should've arrived by now. I reckon before tomorrow evening, they will definitely launch attack."

The rock on his heart seemed to become even heavier.

They were outnumbered and daunted by the army of Yun Chang opposite them. With just Moran and the remaining people beside him, even thinking about escaping from the battle alive was a luxury, let alone protecting the Queen.

Was Dong Lin, the country that once overpowered the four countries with its military power, really going to be ruined like this?

The two people hid in the forest, watching the figures in the enemy camp under the cover of night. As if unable to stand the oppressive atmosphere, Luoshang spoke in a low voice. "The Queen's illness has gotten worse again..." This man had always been optimistic, but now he took on the tone of deep sorrow.

"Hush!" Moran suddenly urged, "Look."

Luoshang followed his gaze and looked across . The soldiers and generals started moving. The camp began to bustle with activity, appearing to be getting ready to attack.

"It seems He Xia has arrived," Luoshang whispered.

Moran coldly nodded. His gaze was sharp as he studied the enemy's movements from far away. The enemy army orderly lined up on the hillside. They had a large number of soldiers from the siege. He Xia brought even more. The enemy Yun Chang army seemed to be in endless supply as they appeared in the horizon. Every squad had a captain with a flaming torch. From afar, it all seemed like a line of sparks stretched across the mountain.

Moran and Luoshang had accompanied Chu Beijie to all sorts of places, fought in numerous wars, but never once tried a battle with such a large gap in strength. Their hearts couldn't help freeze.

Moran looked at Luoshang, grinding his teeth. “The decisive battle is approaching. You go protect the Queen, and I’ll take the men to resist here for a while.”

Luoshang looked at the flashing blades on the opposite side, dense like a forest, before looking back at the pitiful amount of soldiers behind him. He understood none of them would be able to survive this battle. He had been with Chu Beijie for many years and was used to seeing the difference between life and death. He knew this critical moment could not be dragged on. He lowered his voice, “Good brother, kill as many enemies as you can. We can compare who killed the most on the way to the afterlife.”

He whacked Moran’s shoulder and fell back into the dense forest to report the bad news to the Queen of Dong Lin.

Wuuu...

The long sound from the horn began to sound on the opposite hillside, travelling through to the skies.

Boom, boom...

After the horn sounded, the heavy drums began to boom. At first the rhythm stopped after every two or three strikes, as if the sky had finally spitted out a few drops of rain after several days of overcast.

Gradually, the rain began to fall. The drum gradually became more intensive, the rhythm faster and faster, the sound louder and louder. It seemed the earth had decided to follow the drum’s frightening momentum, causing all the listening Dong Lin soldiers’ hearts to thump faster and faster.

When the drumming came to the climax, the gracefully ordered army of Yun Chang finally began to move.

The sky was filled with the light of fire, reflecting blades, as they aggressively charged towards the patch of forest they had been surrounding.

“Stand up, the enemy is too big. Hiding is useless.” Moran stood in the forest he had been hiding in for so long. He turned to look at the other Dong Lin soldiers who had been hiding behind him. “The final battle has begun. Sons of Dong Lin, straighten your spines!”

The enemy general at the front was rapidly approaching them.

The metallic footsteps before them had broken silence, particularly the forest's tranquillity.

The representative of the Dong Lin Royal House – the Queen – and the final remnants of Dong Lin's military power were once hidden in this silence.

Moran threw away concerns about life or death. He looked at the massive Yun Chang army and likened them to a cloud of birds that gradually swarmed towards them. He displayed the courage Chu Beijie honed and was not afraid in the slightest as he took out the sword from his waist, quietly waiting for the two sides to meet.

The raging fire slowly approached, dyeing the forest trees red.

Moran led his comrades who shared a common destiny. They stood straight in the cold evening wind.

Everyone held their breath.

Dong Lin, the place that I was born and grew up, I will shed my blood and bury my body for you.

No one was afraid. They once followed the one and only Duke of Zhen-Bei. They have seen the small gap between life and death, as well as ultimate glory.

The despair over certain death, forced ruthlessness into their eyes.

The army of Yun Chang pressed closer and closer, the hooves becoming more rapid.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" The Yun Chang soldiers growled, causing a terribly giant sound that echoed in the mountains.

The general at the very front of the Yun Chang army had his sword ready. His horse ran freely. The army was like a massive beast whose shackles were finally unlocked. They charged at Moran and the rest at an incredibly fast speed.

Come.

Moran's hand tightened around his sword.

He knew he was bound to be swallowed up by this flood, just like how Dong Lin

was bound to become history in this firelight.

“Kill! Kill!”

The incoming flames clearly lit up their faces.

Calvary, spears, and swords covered their line of sight. The mighty force of thousands of soldiers brought the roar of the wind as they surged forward. The dignified air no longer had the strength to act as barrier against the two parties. Moran’s gaze glued onto the general at the very front of the Yun Chang army, who was undoubtedly the main commander of this decisive battle.

“Kill!”

The fast horses rushed in front of him. The enemy general swung down at Moran’s head from his horse.

The instant Moran raised his sword, he heard the sound of wind.

Fwish.

Drums rumbled and battle cries split the skies yet he heard the sound of wind, as if all the drums, battle cries, were all less important than that slight sound of wind.

“Ah!” There was a piercing scream which appeared to be from the mouth of the enemy general on the horse. His hand was posed above Moran’s head before his body began to violently shake and fall stiffly off his horse.

A glistening golden arrow had pierced into his head, straight through the forehead.

It was a good shot. The arrow was fast and extremely accurate.

The two sides who had been prepared to fight to death were shocked to a standstill by this horrible scene.

The weapons were almost about to hit when the main commander of Yun Chang suddenly died in a most bizarre way. It shocked the Yun Chang soldiers more than anything.

For a moment, for a single fleeting moment.

The main commander actually fell just before the battle had actually begun.

General Chengjing had died.

General Chengjing of the Weimo Regiment, one of Yun Chang's seven regiments, had been killed by an arrow.

Who had such ability?

As the arrow pierced from the back of his head, the archer had to be behind. The Yun Chang soldiers were rather scared as they turned to look behind their own army.

They saw.

On the hillside rear, a figure on a horse appeared.

Moran studied the figure. His body began to quake. He was so excited he could barely hold onto the sword in his hands.

Was this real?

The rider had one hand on the reins, the other hand on a bow. He had stopped at the top of the hillside. Even though the moon was bright, the crowd couldn't see the man's face. In the haziness, they could only see the light that filtered out from his sides. He was facing Yun Chang's army of several thousand, yet was all alone, like a god who had come into the mortal world.

So far away...

Was he the owner of the golden arrow?

The cavalry units tried to answer the questions amongst themselves until the figure pulled out an arrow and drew the bow. The motion was as fluid as water, the sound of breaking wind appeared again. Its momentum was terrifying. In just a blink of the eye, the golden light flashed by.

"Ah!" came another scream. It broke the quiet world caused by the shocking death of Chengjing.

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, another lieutenant of Yun Chang fell off his horse, landing beside the body of Chengjing.

Utterly terrifying!

The Yun Chang army began to rustle with fear. Who was he? Who had such

terrifying abilities?

Like a struck of lightning, the rattled soldiers of Yun Chang were shocked again by this second arrow. They finally remembered they were on the merciless battle.

But some people reacted quicker than them.

The opposition's swords quickly flung them off.

"The Duke! The Duke has returned!" Moran chopped down a few of the Yun Chang soldiers who lost their fighting spirit. His face was full of surprise at this miraculous encounter. He howled, "Brothers, yell with me! The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned!"

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned! The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned!"

The sound of extremely delighted howls filled the remote hillside.

The title, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, was more effective than any other weapon in slashing away the Yun Chang army's morale.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei once lead the army of Dong Lin and unnerved the whole world.

Even Yun Chang's god of war, the Prince Consort, didn't dare underestimate the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

The man, amongst tens of thousands of soldiers, took away General Chengjing's life with a single arrow.

Chu Beijie had his horse stopped on the hillside in the moonlight. The Yun Chang army saw an even more terrifying seen. Figures of men continued to appear from Chu Beijie's side, appearing behind the rear of the Yun Chang army.

On the other side of the hill, Dong Lin actually had soldiers led by the Duke of Zhen-Bei hidden in ambush.

They'd been tricked!

They had really been ambushed by the Duke of Zhen-Bei from behind. This completely shattered the remaining morale of the Yun Chang army. No one knew who was the first, but someone screamed before throwing down the spear in his

hands, running elsewhere to escape.

“Duke of Zhen-Bei! It’s the Duke of Zhen-Bei!”

“Run...run!”

The defeated soldiers were like a fallen mountain. Without their lead and vice commanders, the Yun Chang army became a pile of scattered dust.

Moran led his men, surging from behind to kill. After seeing the legendary missing Chu Beijie suddenly appear, he knew the Yun Chang soldiers who dropped their weapons would never summon the courage to resist again.

“Kill!”

“Ahhh!”

The screams continued. The escaping Yun Chang army was like an uncontrollable flood, oozing in every direction.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, the once missing foothold of Dong Lin, had returned.

The forest, hillside, and land underneath the moon were filled with the smell of blood.

Moran was too busy to bother chasing the collapsing Yun Chang army. He stepped over the floor covered in Yun Chang soldiers as he sprinted towards the figure on the hillside.

He never sprinted so fast in his life before until he could see that familiar face, the calm expression he thought he’d never be able to see.

“Duke!” With all his bloody wounds, Moran pounced at Chu Beijie’s feet. “You...You’re finally back...”

He had always been calm and reserved, but at this moment, he was delighted beyond control. The thousands of words in his heart wasn’t able to be formed at all, so he just burst into tears.

The Dong Lin soldiers that rushed behind him were equally delighted. All of them knelt with a thump, some of them not able to stop their tears either.

Chu Beijie pulled Moran up, shouting, “Men on the battlefield should bleed not cry. What are you crying for?” He carefully studied Moran’s bleeding face for

a while before his voice became serious. “Moran, you’ve done good.” When he heard of Dong Lin’s people being trapped, he rushed nonstop, finally saving Moran and the others. He himself was quite delighted but wasn’t used to revealing it in front of such a crowd. He asked, “Is Sister-in-Law all right?”

“The Queen is in the forest. Fortunately Duke has arrived at the right time.” Talking about these serious matters, Moran retrieved the excited expression on his face. His face darkened slightly as he whispered, “Duke, the Queen’s illness has gotten worse.”

Chu Beijie was silent at this. “I’ll go see her.” He then turned, his voice becoming a lot more gentle. “Pingting, will you come with me?”

Only then did Moran realise there was a graceful figure behind Chu Beijie. He couldn’t help being shocked, “Miss Bai?”

Pingting took off her veil. “Moran, long time no see.” She smiled faintly and then turned to Chu Beijie. “I’ll go with you.”

She let Chu Beijie help her onto the horse and gently put her hand in Chu Beijie’s large palm. The two rode together, down the hillside and into the forest.

The rest of the people went down the hill, returning to the tiny camp inside the forest together.

When they got closer towards the camp, they happened to see Luoshang maniacally bolt out. He almost collided with Chu Beijie who had just dismounted.

Luoshang raised his head and saw Chu Beijie’s face, screaming, “It’s really the Duke? It wasn’t a joke?”

The impossible miracle suddenly happened. He was so excited that he forgot about the hierarchy and grabbed onto Chu Beijie’s hand.

Chu Beijie patted his shoulder, glancing him with appreciation. “Attaboy, you’ve grown up. I’m going to see Sister-in-Law first and we’ll talk later.” He then led Pingting into the tent, leaving Luoshang rooted to his spot in disbelief.

He suddenly grabbed onto Moran who had been following them. His face was really quite serious as he asked, “We didn’t meet the Duke because we’re already on the way to the afterlife, right?”

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 63

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The inside of the tent was dimly lit by candle.

Chu Beijie led Pingting through the tent flap, immediately seeing the Queen lying on the bed. Her once silky black hair had almost gone completely white.

This graceful queen of a country's face was gray and defeated. Fine wrinkles had formed due to worry, covering her once exquisite and beautiful face.

She had accompanied the King through his final years and suffered more than enough torment as Dong Lin fell.

"Sister-in-Law." Chu Beijie tiptoed towards the bedside, whispering softly.

The Queen's long lashes began to flutter as she opened her eyes that had its former glory. It took a while before the face she saw came into focus.

"You've returned." The Queen weakly breathed in, not having strength to articulate her words. "I heard you drove away the Yun Chang soldiers surrounding us."

"Sister-In-Law, you've been suffering."

The Queen shook her head, squeezing a wry smile onto her face. Her gaze shifted beyond Chu Beijie and was suddenly surprised.

Chu Beijie seemed to notice. He took a step back and held onto Pingting's limp hand to calm her down.

The atmosphere in the tent began to feel unusually stiff.

The Queen's gaze stopped on Pingting for a very long time.

“Bai Pingting?” Her voice was very low as she slowly spat out the three syllables between her teeth, a past that had chewed at her for so long.

Pingting bent down, bowing deeply. “Queen.”

“Bai Pingting, Miss Bai...” The Queen said, “Please come here, let me look at you.”

Pingting answered, stepping forward and stopping in front of the Queen’s bed.

In the dim candlelight, two complicated expressions met.

This was the first time they had clearly seen the other’s face.

While the past disappeared with the wind, memories didn’t easily fade.

There was so much pain, love and hate. From being forced to leave the secluded residence, the queen losing her son, Chu Beijie losing Pingting and Dong Lin losing Chu Beijie.

And under the hooves of Yun Chang’s invasion, Dong Lin too had lost Dong Lin.

They had been tangled by fate, hurting others and hurting themselves, but only today did they finally know the other’s face.

The Queen quietly looked at Pingting, asking, “Do you hate me?”

Pingting answered with another question, “Does Queen hate me?”

All of the past in their mind was like a rock in lightning, disappearing in a single moment, leaving the witness to sigh at the remnants. It was no more than a handful of smoke.

The Queen’s gaze shifted away from Pingting’s face, stopping on Chu Beijie beside her. She faintly sighed.

“When the King died, he asked me a question.” The Queen’s lonely expression contained her memories, “The King asked that if we too, were born between enemy countries and directly opposing positions, would we still be willing to stay by each other?”

She didn’t go on and her face revealed that she was deeply in recollection.

“What did Sister-In-Law reply?” After what seemed a long time, Chu Beijie finally opened his mouth to ask.

The Queen looked at Chu Beijie, a faint smile appearing at the corners of his lips. She didn't answer Chu Beijie's question, whispering, "The King had always been hoping that the Duke of Zhen-Bei would return to succeed Dong Lin's throne. I can finally be reassured and go now."

"Sister-In-Law." Chu Beijie half-knelt by the bed. He gently held onto her hand, carefully looking at this lady of the Royal Residence who had painstakingly protected Dong Lin for all these years. They were family. A long time ago, because he was very close to his brother, he knew his sister-in-law very well. They had banquets together, sat on the same platforms while watching dance, and laughed together while her sons played. "You will get better."

"It doesn't matter whether I get better or not." The Queen faintly smiled, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, we've all done a lot of wrong."

Thinking of his brother that had always pampered him, Chu Beijie painfully closed his eyes. He lowered his voice, "Chu Beijie is at fault for disappointing Brother and making Sister-in-Law suffer."

The Queen glanced at his two eyes, tiredly closing her own. The scene of her husband's death slowly floated in her thoughts. The scene of the Royal Residence of Dong Lin in flames followed.

She released a long sigh. "Who has never made a single fault?" She looked at Pingting, her eyes lowered and silent. "Haven't the King and I made mistakes before? That day when we agreed to He Xia's private arrangement, we did everything we could think of to separate Miss Bai who the Duke of Zhen-Bei loves as much as his life in exchange to disband the allied army between the Yun Chang and Bei Mo. We knew it was wrong, yet we still made the wrong decision. In comparison, Miss Bai is the one who has never made a single fault on purpose."

Pingting shook her head, her lowered eyelashes rising to reveal her distinct eyes that glanced at Chu Beijie. She sighed, "Queen is wrong. Pingting knew the world was about to become a mess and pretended to be dead, hiding due to selfish resentment. I refused to explain Duke's misunderstanding, hesitated to act, resulting in loss of life. Even when I knew it was wrong, I refused to go back."

Her gaze met with Chu Beijie's.

Moran and Luoshang were waiting outside the tent. The aftermath of their excitement had not even begun to disperse. Even though their surroundings were pitch black due to being deep in the forest and the sun was far from rising, everyone's eyes seemed like bright lights. It seemed as if they had already seen the rising sun of the next morning.

"It's true, it's true..." Every once in a while, Luoshang would murmur these words, his face full of joy.

Moran vigorously patted him on the shoulder. He turned around to look at the brothers who survived through the tough battles with him. Not long ago, they had sworn to die in battle, not expecting that even one could make it out alive. Unspeakable joy coursed through him.

They waited for a long time when the tent flap moved slightly.

Luoshang leapt to his feet, "They're coming."

All of the people stood up, their energy a hundredfold. They eagerly eyed the tent flap.

Chu Beijie and Pingting came out.

"Sister-In-Law has already fully given Dong Lin's royal authority to me. From now on, all of Dong Lin's troops must listen to me."

Chu Beijie's calm and steady voice entered everyone's ears.

He had always been the legitimate Dong Lin Royal House heir. There was none who didn't accept this handover procedure, no matter how simple.

"The war situation is urgent; we have no time to spend reminiscing." Chu Beijie looked up at the sky, "The Yun Chang army collapsing is only due to their army's resolve in a mess. They haven't been weakened all that much in reality and will rapidly regroup. We must immediately evacuate this area before their flag and horns are raised again. Moran."

"Here!"

"Immediately rectify the army, prepare to depart."

"Yes!"

“Luoshang.”

“Here!”

“You’re in charge of the Queen’s safety. Select a good horse. There are some soft hay in the carriage.” Chu Beijie lowered his voice to instruct, “Be careful, don’t let her be jolted.”

“I shall go do it immediately.”

Chu Beijie was concise with his commands and consecutively made several of them. These people accompanied him through fire & water and long gotten used to his commands. Seeing their Duke’s return, they immediately recovered their backbones with newfound agility. There was a chain of “Yes!”, “Yes!” as the crowd hurried off to complete their own tasks.

The entire camp’s movement was fast. In less than half an hour, everything was prepared. Each person came to report back to Chu Beijie. And so, the camp seemed to disperse on the spot as they hid their traces before heading towards the south of the gorge.

Chu Beijie sent another party out to prepare all sorts of false alarms and tracks on the way. These would confuse the enemy so the army of Yun Chang wouldn’t find their route.

When they stopped to rest for the night, Chu Beijie summoned all of the generals. What seemed like ages, Dong Lin finally had their very first military conference in the open woodlands.

Chu Beijie had been living in seclusion for two years. Once upon coming out, he immediately rushed to save the Dong Lin Royal House from being surrounded and had yet to have a comprehensive understanding of the four countries’ current status.

Moran deliberately described the current situation to begin. He concluded, “He Xia has gotten the rights for a treasury and granary as well as significantly raised the taxes towards the military. The rewards to be in the Yun Chang army has temporarily significantly increase. After being baptised with countless battles, as well as He Xia’s personal honing, the Yun Chang army of today is no longer the dormant, self-protecting army of the past.

“But the once more official armies of Dong Lin and Bei Mo, have all been defeated by He Xia’s Yun Chang army.” Recalling the current terrible situation, Luoshang solemnly added, “The only army that can barely resist Yun Chang would be Gui Le’s official army.”

“Gui Le is currently in civil strife. The King He Su and General Le Zhen are opposing each other. They barely have enough to care about themselves, not to mention the army of Yun Chang.”

Ruohan said, “My Bei Mo has a few secret strongholds for possible recruits to enlist at. Ever since Main General Ze Yin’s open challenge to He Xia, the number of young men enlisting increase day by day. The current figure has increased to more than ten thousand, but we don’t have weapons nor horses.

“After the defeat in the Battle of Fuzha River, our Dong Lin has completely lost its former military strength. Several of the people lost hope so they fled, while the rest of the people are here.” Moran turned back, looking at the cold and rather empty looking camp. “Including the wounded, we don’t have more than eight thousand.”

A moment of silence.

In comparison, Yun Chang already had assembled a massive army of more than three hundred thousand. Even assuming by full strength, they only had fifteen hundred.

After a day of travelling, their excitement from their first sight of Chu Beijie had gradually calmed, as the grim reality that lay ahead started to kick in.

They had the Duke of Zhen-Bei who could lead troops, but what about the horses?

Chu Beijie pondered for a while. He held up a hand. “Everyone, go get some rest. We still have to rapidly journey on tomorrow as we mustn’t let the Yun Chang army catch up to us.”

Everyone knew the main advisor needed some time to think so they all parted. Only Moran trailed behind Chu Beijie as he walked like how he always accompanied him before his Master slept.

The two people enjoyed the quiet evening breeze. They watched the flickering

fire lights slowly part and diminish.

“You didn’t mention Chen Mu just now.”

“General Chen Mu...he died in battle when the Yun Chang army attacked the capital.” Moran’s voice was grave, “The Senior Official was too frail and was unable to come with us to evacuate. I heard that he didn’t want to suffer the humiliation of capture, so he committed suicide by poison.”

Both of the moods were equally heavy. Chu Beijie heaved a sigh and held his hands behind his back as he silently studied outside.

This was Moran’s first chance to privately talk with Chu Beijie since their reunion. His heart held countless questions and he couldn’t help say, “Duke, Miss Bai she...”

“She’s still alive. She forgave me and returned to my side.”

“That day...wasn’t she said to be already with Duke’s...”

Chu Beijie suddenly stopped walking. His resolute face revealed a hint of pain. Moran had been with him for many years and had very rarely seen the Duke be so unable to control his own emotions. He secretly regretted saying the wrong thing but heard Chu Beijie’s hoarse whisper. “She has experienced far too much. Surviving was already difficult enough, not to mention while protecting her child? I...”

His fist clenched and unclenched, and clenched again.

“...I just can’t ask her.”

That suffering child was most likely gone.

After seeing Pingting, he had been travelling without stop to try solve this chaotic situation, from the dense forest spanning miles to Jiangling Ancient City, then to save Moran and the rest. He hadn’t had much time at all to discuss the past with Pingting.

It wasn’t really that much at all, but he, the dignified Duke of Zhen-Bei who could face thousands of soldiers without batting an eyelid, couldn’t find the slightest hint of courage whenever this problem was mentioned. He knew no matter how sweet his words or how much he thanked to skies, he could never

summon enough courage.

He couldn't dare imagine the Yun Chang soldiers hunting Pingting, falling into all sorts of treacherous circumstances, her devastating loss of the child in her belly.

And perhaps this tragic matter had already become a bloody wound on Pingting's heart, one she would refuse to talk about even today?

Chu Beijie stood outside his own tent, his mixed feelings made him unable to take a step further.

Moran's question had directly stepped on the thorn in his heart. He really wanted to pull it out, but if he did, wouldn't it cause Pingting to be hurt again?

She had painstakingly returned to his side. Chu Beijie would rather give away his life than letting Pingting feel the slightest trace of sadness.

That child...

"How long does Duke want to stand outside?" asked a gentle voice. The tent entrance was lifted as Pingting appeared from the inside the door.

She walked out, taking Chu Beijie's hand in hers, leading him into the tent. She smiled, "Pingting has always acknowledged Duke's ability to lead troops. No matter how grim the situation is, there isn't a need for Duke to feel so distressed. What on earth have Moran and Duke been talking about to make Duke reveal such a depressed expression?"

Chu Beijie held onto Pingting's soft hand, warm and gentle. He tightened his grip and felt that heaven would be like this, delightfully beautiful. He thought of how his one question he wanted to ask would destroy it all and gritted his teeth, finally making his choice.

"Pingting, that day in the secluded residence..."

"Duke, the spies we sent out have returned." At the most inappropriate time ever, the report was made outside the tent.

For some reason however, Chu Beijie secretly sighed in relief. He hurriedly went outside, "Speak!"

In the capital of Yun Chang, all faces were without colour.

“What?” He Xia, dressed in white, slapped the table before standing. He was astonished. “Chu Beijie suddenly appeared?”

“Correct.” The messenger was kneeling, not daring to raise his head. “Several soldiers personally witnessed the Duke of Zhen-Bei on the hillside. Just a single arrow was enough to shoot General Chengjing to death.”

“How many people did he have?”

“I have asked the soldiers, but they all said they didn’t know.”

He Xia fumed, “When two armies are clashing, how can you not know how many men appeared in the ambush from behind?”

“Report to Prince Consort. Back then...when they saw the Duke of Zhen-Bei, they were all scared and confused. The army was defeated and dispersed before the armies even clashed...”

“Bastards!” He Xia yelled.

The messenger soldier was like a cicada in winter, not daring to make a single sound.

“Tens of thousands of soldiers ran away at the sight of a single silhouette on the hillside before the armies even clashed.” He Xia started pacing back and forth in the room, seething, “What the heck was Chengjing doing? Even if he was still alive, I’d punish him for not being strict enough when training his soldiers.”

Ever since the death of Princess Yaotian, the Prince Consort completely grasped the royal authority of Yun Chang. A vicious evil seemed to be unconsciously present in his eyes, chilling his audiences.

The messenger knelt right against the ground. Listening to He Xia’s thuds overhead, each sound seemed to drum at his own heart until it banged and rattled. He suddenly heard a voice outside, reporting, “Prince Consort, the messenger stationed at the Royal Residence of Dong Lin has arrived.”

“Let him come in.”

The door was pushed open, and another dusty-looking messenger came in to kneel. He panted as he reported, “Report to Prince Consort, the Duke of Zhen-Bei suddenly appeared in Dong Lin’s capital, killing several Yun Chang soldiers.”

“What’s that?” He Xia stopped, “Elaborate.”

“Six days ago, the Duke of Zhen-Bei appeared outside the Dong Lin capital, using a bow and arrow to kill several soldiers stationed on the city walls.”

“Why didn’t you send pursuers?”

“The General immediately sent troops out from the city, but once the Duke of Zhen-Bei finished provoking, he immediately led the other riders beside him away. By the time we hurried to outside the city, they disappeared into the distance. The night was late too, so their traces were difficult to find.”

“Late at night?” He Xia narrowed his eyes, “He was at the capital six nights ago?”

“Yes.”

He Xia looked at the messenger who arrived first. “Just then, you said Chu Beijie appeared on the hillside six days ago, before the trapped Dong Lin Royal House in the dense forest?”

“Yes, Prince Consort.”

“These two places are too far apart, how could Chu Beijie possibly be in two places at once?”

“That...is...”

“Was his face clearly seen?” He Xia asked the messenger sent from Dong Lin’s capital.

“His face wasn’t seen. According to the soldiers at the scene, the people around him were all shouting ‘the Duke of Zhen-Bei’...”

“Imbecile, you determined he was the Duke of Zhen-Bei just because the other party yelled a bit? How could such a ridiculous ploy trick me?” He Xia shouted, “Someone! Take him away!”

“Have mercy! Prince Consort, have mercy on me! I don’t dare speak nonsense, I can’t possibly stage a ploy! All of the people in Dong Lin are saying the Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned, but whether it’s true or not, I will definitely investigate it in detail...” The messenger repeatedly kowtowed.

Dongzhuo hurried through the door with a letter. Seeing He Xia's ashen expression, he glanced back at the messengers desperately pleading for mercy. He asked, "Master?"

He Xia saw he was holding an army report and knew it was something important. He ordered, "I can't be bothered, so I'll let you go for now. You can go."

The two messengers' lives were spared. They stumbled out.

"Master, Chu Beijie appeared at the Bei Mo capital."

"When?"

"Six days ago."

He Xia sneered, "Six days ago, Chu Beijie appeared in three places, Dong Lin capital, the forest, and Bei Mo's capital. Even idiots know what's going on."

Dongzhuo suddenly understood, "Someone is using Chu Beijie's fame and is impersonating him to shake my army's morale. True though, Chu Beijie has been missing for so long. He should have long appeared when the Dong Lin Royal Residence was being attacked, so there's no way he'd suddenly appear at such a time!

He Xia closed his eyes for a few moments, listening to Dongzhuo's words. He opened his eyes again, an excited ray of light jumping in his eyes.

"No, it actually shows that Chu Beijie really has appeared. This plan of appearing in three places is defence by seeing the enemy's first attack, trying to trick us into believing someone else is impersonating Chu Beijie. It's a pity it can trick others but can't trick me."

Dongzhuo was shocked and took a while before taking a deep breath of cold air. He raised his concerns, "If it really is Chu Beijie himself, will Master gather up the army and immediately go to Dong Lin to defeat him?"

"Chu Beijie specialises in hiding his trail. Do you know how many resources and time he needs to prepare for a battle in the vast Dong Lin?" He Xia's handsome features hid a sharpness. The corners of his lips lifted slightly, "Send an Order, prepare to depart. I will head for Gui Le."

Dongzhuo's expression was puzzled. "Fei Zhaoxing and Shang Lu have already been sent to Gui Le and are enough to finish off Gui Le while it is in civil strife. Why must Master go himself?"

"When fighting a giant, attack its Achilles heel. Dongzhuo, do you know where Chu Beijie's Achilles heel is?" He Xia's bright eyes swivelled, giving Dongzhuo a profound look.

"Chu Beijie's Achilles heel?" Dongzhuo had no answer to the question. His eyebrows furrowed as he pondered.

He Xia saw he didn't know and chuckled. "Chu Beijie's Achilles heel lies in the two words, soldier and horse."

Straight to the point.

Dongzhuo suddenly jolted with realisation.

Dong Lin and Bi Mo's elite soldiers have already been lost. If Chu Beijie wanted to gain a large amount of soldiers, he would have to try his luck with the Gui Le army.

He Xia need to immediately reach Gui Le. As long as he ruined the Gui Le army, he would break Chu Beijie's last dream of getting troops.

A housewife cannot cook a meal without rice. Without soldiers and horses, what could Chu Beijie do?

Even if he was a God, there was no way his strength was enough to fight against the massive Yun Chang army.

After everything was decided, the two people stepped out of the office one after the other.

"Even now, I hardly believe Chu Beijie would suddenly appear." Dongzhuo mumbled as he walked, "Why on earth would he come out of the mountains for no reason at all."

"Chu Beijie would not have come out for any reason at all."

"Master?"

"There must be a reason." He Xia replied in a serious voice. His bright eyes

swivelled towards the rear courtyard. In the shadows, he saw the room Pingting once lived in.

The room door remained tightly shut.

In this huge world, who else but her had the power to bring the devastated Chu Beijie out of the mountains?

Translation Notes:

- “A housewife cannot cook a meal without rice”: You can’t do anything without having the right resources. At first I wanted to translated this as, “You can’t make bricks without straw”, which is a more common English saying, but the literal translation makes sense as well.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 64

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch64

Chu Beijie spent the last few days on the road while hiding his trails. He constantly sent out elite spies, assessing the news from all sorts of places.

They finally found a secluded place to set the camp. Afterwards everyone gathered inside the tattered tents, discussing various things again.

“Miss Bai’s plan was indeed very useful.” Ruohan was pleased to report, “On the day the Duke of Zhen-Bei appeared in the forest, I followed Miss Bai’s words and arranged a few men who had a similar stature to the Duke of Zhen-Bei to appear before normal Yun Chang soldiers. I also got them to announce themselves as the Duke of Zhen-Bei so the entire Yun Chang army’s morale will panic.

Luoshang excitedly nodded. “This tactic killed two birds with one stone. The normal soldiers of Yun Chang were terrified out of their guts, spreading rumours everywhere. However, it’s simply impossible for one person to appear at so many places. The ranking soldiers and generals of the Yun Chang army would all think it’s an enemy’s trick. Even if He Xia knows about, he’ll just think it’s a rumour. As long as he doesn’t immediately send troops to crush us, we still have a chance to recuperate and train.”

“That little thieving He Xia definitely fell for it.” Sen Rong heartily laughed, “The spies reported He Xia has received urgent reports from the various locations. Not only did he not assemble his army to head for Dong Lin but immediately left for Gui Le. That just shows he doesn’t believe the Duke of Zhen-Bei is truly in Dong Lin. Ha ha, all in all, Miss Bai’s defence in seeing the enemy’s first attack is one clever trick.”

Pingting sat next to Chu Beijie. Although she was being praised again and again by everyone, her elegant expression didn't light up at all. She gently sighed, revealing a wry smile. "Pingting feels rather ashamed. If He Xia personally rushes to Gui Le, this means Pingting's plan to confuse the enemy has been seen through."

"What?" The smiles on their faces froze for a moment.

Chu Beijie lightly held onto Pingting's small hand under the table. He turned to look at Pingting, calmly laughing. "The day He Xia reaches Gui Le, the day the army of Gui Le will be destroyed. To us, it means we will never be able to get help from the troops of Gui Le. It will become a lost dream."

The Yun Chang army was increasingly growing day by day. Contrarily, the armies of Bei Mo and Dong Lin had collapsed. If even the army of Gui Le were to be crushed, then where else could they find sufficient strength to oppose He Xia's power?

They couldn't possibly go head on against Yun Chang's tens of thousands with their fifteen hundred, right?

The generals who were just celebrating over tricking He Xia instantly had their expressions darken.

If He Xia gets rid of the Gui Le army, he would no longer have anything to worry about. With Yun Chang's current strength, it was likely all rebel troops of the future would form in the palm of his hand. He could toy with them like a cat savouring its play time with a mouse.

Chu Beijie saw everyone's confidence drop. He smiled, defending Pingting. "Miss Bai's tactics are still clever, perhaps you have a way to deal with this bad situation before us?"

Pingting returned him with a gentle gaze. She sincerely replied, "Why ask me? Duke looks very confident enough, obviously already knowing a way out."

Chu Beijie broke out laughing. "You're testing me." He squeezed her hand even tighter under the table.

The Queen of Dong Lin's condition had improved slightly. She too was there, leaning propped up against a cushion. At this time, she interrupted them, "I've

almost watched the Duke of Zhen-Bei grow up, so I am completely confident in the Duke's ability to lead troops. He will always calmly cope, no matter how terrible the situation is. But it's Miss Bai's abilities that I would really like to see."

She was Chu Beijie's Sister-in-Law. Whenever she spoke, her words were never light. Pingting knew that she was testing her own abilities but didn't mind. Her gaze shifted, eyeing the tent once, before her delicate lips parted. "Yun Chang has many soldiers while my side has few which is He Xia's biggest advantage. At the moment, we must change his advantage into his disadvantage."

Moran frowned. "Of course turning advantage to disadvantage is the most ideal plan, but how could we do that?"

Sen Rong was the most direct. "Almost impossible."

"How isn't it possible?" Pingting faintly returned with another question. Although her voice was light, it held a hidden self-confidence. Each word was like a bead clattering into a jade bowl as she clearly analysed, "The reason why the Yun Chang army has such immense strength is because they have taken in a large number of captives and prisoners of war. General Sen Rong, do you know how many soldiers of the massive Yun Chang army have been single-handedly trained by He Xia himself?"

Luoshang answered the question before Sen Rong. "At the moment, the Yun Chang army is composed of two factions. One faction is made up of prisoners of war from various other countries while the other is the official Yun Chang army. Of course the prisoners of war joined halfway so their loyalty isn't particularly high. As for the Yun Chang official army, they were never originally part of He Xia's men anyway. If the big changes were to occur in the Yun Chang, He Xia would find it difficult to control the situation."

"Which is also the reason why He Xia has resorted to a high pay system. He would rather arouse resentment amongst the peasants to conquer the four countries in the shortest time and with any means possible. He must achieve his goals while he can still control them. He can't afford a large-scale moment of unrest in the army." Chu Beijie added.

After all, he was only a Prince Consort leading an army. Above him, was the dead but still present Royal House of Dong Lin. Below him are the generals and

officials that have yet to full acknowledge him. Outside, he has the furious Dong Lin and Bei Mo soldiers who have yet to surrender. The seemingly brilliant army of Yun Chang is in fact built without a solid foundation.”

He Xia was deeply aware of this.

“He was never such a bad person, but...” Pingting’s face inadvertently had a passing hint of vague sadness. She cheered up before continuing, “What we must do now is to cause great disturbance within the Yun Chang army.”

Now that a clear goal appeared, the dispirited generals instantly cheered up.

“Wonderful!” Sen Rong began to laugh and applauded. “Rather than painstakingly expanding our own army, it’s better to destroy the enemy’s army.”

Moran was relatively calmer. He rationally examined, “Easier said than done. He Xia is a famous general who has his own way with training soldiers. The Yun Chang army won’t become chaotic so easily.”

“Moran is right. To cause a riot in the Yun Chang army, we have to approach from multiple sides. To be honest, someone has already done the first for us.” Chu Beijie looked encouragingly at Moran, “Moran should be able to guess who I’m talking about.”

Due to the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s direct address, Moran carefully thought for a moment. His eyes suddenly brightened. He raised his head. “That’s right, Bei Mo’s Main General Ze Yin did it. He openly challenged He Xia before Yun Chang’s several thousands of soldiers with just a single horse and himself. Even though he failed, he managed to injure He Xia’s shoulder. This matter has been secretly spread throughout the land. He Xia can be injured. This undoubtedly left a hidden scar in the hearts of the normal soldiers who revere He Xia like a god, as well as the deeply revered He Xia himself.”

As expected, he answered correctly. Chu Beijie revealed a pleased smile at this subordinate who followed him for all these years. He nodded in appreciation and sighed. “Even though Ze Yin was one of my opponents, I am extremely impressed by the courageous strength in his blood.”

“A heroic man.” Luoshang agreed.

Ruohan and Sen Rong were generals alongside Ze Yin for many years too.

Hearing their former Main General, they couldn't help tear up a little.

"I believe the second has already been done by someone else." The Queen of Dong Lin also entered the discussion. "That is, the news of the Duke of Zhen-Bei appearing everywhere. The Duke of Zhen-Bei and the Marquess of Jing-An are the two widely acclaimed generals in this world. Ever since the Duke of Zhen-Bei's disappearance, everyone has viewed the Marquess of Jing-An as an invincible war god. That's why, the Duke of Zhen-Bei's appearance shook the image of invincibility He Xia had finally established within the army of Yun Chang."

Chu Beijie revealed a bitter smile. He turned to look at Pingting. "I really am a bit ashamed. Back when I saw He Xia at Gui Le's borders, I should have used the tactic of feigned retreat. I should have pretended to retreat but actually forcefully clash with He Xia, leaving behind history in which the Duke of Zhen-Bei defeated the Marquess of Jing-An on the battlefield. That way, my appearance would shock the soldiers He Xia leads today even more."

Pingting grinned at him, before whispering, "Duke seems to have forgotten that back then, Pingting was plotting for the Gui Le army. If you did forcefully clash, I would help Master so Duke may not actually get much out of it."

Chu Beijie caught the glimpse of intelligence in her eyes. All of his hairs felt like they wanted to dance for joy. He smiled sheepishly, "I overestimated myself, please forgive me, Advisor Pingting."

Their gazes lightly touched, causing their cheeks to redden and their hearts to thump. It seemed like they had lots of loving words in their throats, dying to happily pour out towards the other. Unfortunately they were in front of a crowd, discussing military affairs that involved life and death which could not be taken lightly. Pingting lowered her gaze, wanting to take out her hand from under the table but Chu Beijie's grip around hers had already tightened with just the slightest twitch.

"The third, I believe, is within Yun Chang. He Xia is only a Prince Consort. This title isn't particularly high or low, but rather embarrassing."

"That's why he is in such a rush to build a new country, so he can officially ascend to the throne as the King, straightening up his rank."

Ruohan coldly replied, “It isn’t that easy to erase a country’s centuries-old Royal House. There are definitely some Yun Chang officials and generals who are unsatisfied with He Xia, but like how he dealt with Yun Chang’s Official General, he would definitely think of ideas to persecute those Yun Chang people who don’t agree with him.

“I heard Princess Yaotian of Yun Chang’s death was suspicious. I bet He Xia not only dares to go against the generals or officials who dislikes him, but even his wife too.”

As Pingting listened, her face fell.

Sen Rong seemed to be quite excited though, “Their struggling under the surface, so we should take this opportunity to succeed. We use this excuse to set up rumours about He Xia harming Princess Yaotian, causing the morale of the army to shake as they have always been loyal to the Royal House.”

“Shouldn’t we try to contact the generals who are secretly being persecuted by He Xia? Maybe they will betray him and surrender to our side,” suggested Moran.

“We cannot afford to act rashly. If He Xia sees through us and uses our plan to his advantage, then we will be in danger.” Pingting said, “It isn’t a fair contest yet. If He Xia takes a wrong step, he has a huge force that can restore it, but if we make the slightest error, we’ll lose the entire war.”

Chu Beijie agreed with Pingting’s comments. He said, “I reckon we must send out spies. The spies must infiltrate and learn more about Yun Chang’s inside. They need to distinguish who we can rely on and those who will never betray the Yun Chang army. These first two groups will be contacted in secret, encouraging them to revolt.”

The Queen of Dong Lin understood, continuing, “The final group will be assassinated in secret, framing He Xia. The conflict between the people of Yun Chang and He Xia will escalate.”

Chu Beijie laughed, “Clever insight, Sister-in-Law.”

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei put it so clearly that even people who don’t understand can.”

Chu Beijie then said, “The words I just said are only a rough guideline, like a dry forest bathed in oil. To ignite it into a huge bonfire, we still need a small spark.”

This remark mentioned a key point. Everyone listened to him, holding their breaths.

They didn’t expect Chu Beijie to tilt his head and smile at Pingting. “If Advisor Bai can think of the solution to generate this spark, I will personally kiss Advisor Bai’s hand ten times to show my gratitude.” His heart had been itching for ages and could no longer keep it in. He just blurted the words out.

A sudden honey-sweet atmosphere flooded in the tense military conference.

The crowd felt embarrassed.

Even Moran, who knew the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s personality the most, couldn’t help break into a cold sweat.

Pingting’s pitch black eyes widened in surprised. She had always been quiet and indifferent. Now two red clouds immediately climbed onto her face, thanks to Chu Beijie’s direct address in front of these generals. She rolled her eyes lightly, already forming a good response. She smiled, “It’s not that I don’t have a solution, but please change the reward, Duke. If Pingting is correct, Duke mustn’t touch Pingting’s hand for ten days.”

Without waiting for Chu Beijie’s response, she slowly said, “There are two tangible measures to destroy the enemy’s army. Of course one is to directly fight each other until one is beaten so that after the battle, the enemy would collapse whenever hearing the Duke’s name. We have to try and narrow the gap between the two troops before having the final confrontation. However this method cannot be used at the moment.”

Chu Beijie waved it away. He eloquently asked, “And then the second?”

“The second, of course, is to stop the enemy’s food supply. How could there not be chaos if the soldiers are hungry?”

Moran said, “That’s another thing that’s easier said than done. He Xia is deeply aware of the art of war and deeply understood the importance of food resources. How could it possibly be so easy to stop his food supply for several tens of thousands of soldiers?”

Pingting's pupils flickered as she exchanged a playful glance with Chu Beijie. She softly asked, "If Pingting answers incorrectly, how will Duke fine her?"

Chu Beijie frowned as he murmured, "You selfishly changed it to such an annoying bet, so I don't want to bet with you anymore. I'll think of a plan myself."

"A bit too late, the stakes are set." Pingting beamed before looking back at the crowd. "The only way to stop He Xia's food supply is to take the risk and capture Yun Chang's central forage."

Ruohan was utterly shocked. "The forage must always be in the very centre, so it is undoubtedly deep with Yun Chang territory. If our army infiltrates there and gets caught..."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Pingting's small smile was wise and particularly calm, radiating in every direction. "Not only do we have to get inside Yun Chang, we have to get in without leaving a trace, raising any sort of alarm like a ghost. The Yun Chang army will promptly surround us if we make the slightest mistake. We would die without proper burial."

"This..." Sen Rong gasped, "How is this possible?"

He wasn't afraid of death, but he definitely would never rashly agreed to die.

The Queen of Dong Lin slowly said, "Even the long-missing Duke of Zhen-Bei's return to the mortal world has happened, what else is impossible? Please continue, Miss Bai. I do wonder if Miss Bai has already concluded which is the city must be captured."

Moran said, "The forage for the Yun Chang army is an important fortress in Zuxi. However, it's the most important one in Yun Chang, and we don't know how many Yun Chang soldiers are guarding it. Even if we desperately manage to make it there, there is no way He Xia wouldn't notice us."

"When did I say to make it to Zuxi?" Pingting shook her head, the bright light of wisdom shining in her eyes. "Although the fortress is important, aren't the checkpoint cities on the way to Zuxi equally important?"

At this remark, everyone's eyes shone.

Sen Rong suddenly slapped his knee hard. “True! Haha, that’s very true! We won’t be able to slip into the heavily guarded Zuxi, so we’ll just focus on when the resources are still on the way.”

Luoshang also appeared to be excited. After standing up, he immediately bowed to Pingting, his face quite solemn as he pleaded, “Please, Miss Bai, don’t keep us hanging and freely solve the mystery. Where on earth is such a city in Yun Chang? My sword hand is really beginning to itch.”

Pingting received the bow and seemed to be a bit embarrassed. She quickly solved the mystery with two words, “Qierou.”

“Qierou?”

Pingting slowly turned back, seeing the happiness in Chu Beijie’s eyes. She softly asked, “Pingting has already solved the mystery. Who won?”

Chu Beijie pretended to be helpless, sighing painfully. “You won.”

Everyone had strained their ears, waiting for his reply. They couldn’t help laugh. The heavy, oppressive atmosphere due to the bad situation was instantly swept away. Even the Queen of Dong Lin couldn’t hold back her chuckles which she held behind her long sleeve.

“Good, then let’s get to the details. Firstly, how do we get the army inside Yun Chang so the enemy army won’t realise we’re trying to capture Qierou.” After laughing, Chu Beijie stood up, the sharpness returning to his eyes. He took out a scroll of cloth from his sleeves and spread it on the table. “Come see.”

The people all came closer, inspecting the detailed yet tidily-drawn army map.

“This is the map that I finished compiling last night after receiving several army reports from my spies. This place here is our target of capture, Qierou City.”

In Yun Chang...

The inside of Qierou City was beautiful except the City Governor’s mood was quite bad.

“Came back again?” Fanlu repeatedly fiddled with his light crossbow in his hands, asking rather lazily.

“Yes.”

“Didn’t he leave the city yesterday?”

“Governor Bing and Sir Bei Zhi An said they invited Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng outside the city yesterday, treating them to a good meal. But for some reason, the two Sirs changed into peasant clothing and entered the city again. The two played around in the restaurant’s brothel, saying they were trying to understand public opinion. They said they were here to check Governor’s performance and wouldn’t leave a day earlier if they hadn’t examined it properly.”

“Public opinion my ass!” Fanlu had been enduring for many days and could no longer suppress his fury. He set his crossbow on the table with a thud, causing the cups to jump a couple of times into the air. While at it, they tipped on their sides, causing the water to splosh over the edges until the table was covered in tea. “Those two little cheaters blackmailed the officials against Yun Chang to earn his favour. How dare they come to blackmail me!”

“Gov...Governor...” The clerk behind him, Dujing, stroked his goatee as he came beside Fanlu’s ear. He urged, “Sir, choose your words carefully. The air in Yun Chang is somewhat jittery, and the Prince Consort has been sending people around to look for those who disrespect him. If Sirs Pu Guang, Pu Sheng or other henchmen of the Prince Consort were to hear those words, then...”

Fanlu harrumphed coldly.

There was no way Fanlu didn’t know of He Xia’s rapid and barbaric methods.

He was a general promoted by Gui Changqing and therefore counted as someone on Gui Changqing’s side. He Xia hated the Gui family to the guts, so naturally he didn’t have a good impression of him.

Currently He Xia was outside, plotting to take down Gui Le. Inside, he had to deal with the important officials and generals who held the real power. He didn’t have time to care about the unimportant governor of Qierou City.

But what about the future?

What if He Xia really did establish a new country, ascend to the throne as the king, completing all of the other physically-depleting tasks? Would he personally come to clean up the rest of the unimportant soldiers and generals?

Needless to say, the future looked bleak. Even now, those cheaters who joined up with He Xia were putting their homes up at stake.

“What else do they do in Qierou City, apart from indulging themselves in drink and other pleasures?” Fanlu shook off the angry expression, revealing an absentminded sarcastic smile.

His subordinate saw he was no longer furious before daring to continue the report. “The two generals have been indulging themselves. As they don’t pay the bill, the boss of the restaurants are asking Governor for the money.”

“Pay for them.”

“Then...Chunyan House’s Old Yang, she came too...”

“Pay for them too.”

“And...”

“You don’t need to say any more, pay for all of them. Serve them properly and let them do what they want.”

After sending away his subordinates to deal with that Pu Guang and Pu Sheng, he still had to deal with the various matters of Qierou City. Fanlu’s heart was anxious. After approving a few documents, he could no longer sit still any more. He summoned for his clerk, Dujing, saying, “This stuff is a mess. Pick out the important ones, write a approximate summary, and hand it to me later.” He then stepped out of his office.

Once he reached the courtyard, he habitually turned right, inadvertently stroding until he reached the door to a very familiar place.

Zuiju happened to be holding a pile of clothes as she headed outside, bumping into Fanlu. She jumped back in shock, her eyes flickering up. She stared at him, “Why’re you being a door god? You’re standing there like a rock, not letting me pass.”

Ever since Dong Lin was invaded by Yun Chang, there had been no news of the people Zuiju knew. Since she had nowhere to go, Fanlu retrieved the lock on her door so she could freely roam around in the residence.

“You mended my clothes?” Fanlu’s gaze fell on her hands.

At this question, Zuiju's cheeks reddened slightly. She immediately stuffed the clothes into his arms, biting her lip as she said, "Who would spend the effort to mend your clothes. It's not like I'm a servant you bought."

"Then why did you take my clothes?"

"I..." Hearing his cold interrogation, the fire in Zuiju's heart couldn't help flare up. She grinded her teeth, "I reckon your clothes are dirty because you're far too annoying. You obviously know that some laundry maid in your residence sucks at washing, yet don't bother getting another. You're a dignified governor, yet you don't even have common sense. Let me tell you this straight off, I'll never re-wash your clothes again."

"Oh...understood." Fanlu liked to see her blushing the most. He lowered his head until he was close to her ear. "You reckon that I don't smell nice when I hold you? But truthfully, it's the clothes that don't smell nice. I am very, very clean and smell nice."

Zuiju had her heart racing with these soft frivolous words. She clutched to her chest as she took a step back, stomping. "You damn hateful man. How could you say such a thing when I kindly washed your clothes for you? You always bully me."

Fanlu squinted at her widened eyes. "You're the hateful woman, getting more and more spoiled. You know I'm not afraid of anything, just your spoiledness. How could I, a dignified governor, always be bullied by you?"

Zuiju was stunned by his shamelessness in stealing phrases for a while. "You... you, you..." She bit her lip, wiping her eyes as she rushed into the room.

Fanlu raised his voice, "Don't cry, don't cry. Fine, I'll take it back. You're not hateful and I'll bully you the way you want me to. If that's not good enough, I won't fight back." He said this as he chased her inside, holding onto the huge pile of clothes.

He was rather eccentric. He deliberately tried to provoke Zuiju and then went out of his way to cheer her up again.

Zuiju wasn't that easily cheered up, however. She turned her back on him, fuming, "I don't want to see you. I'm going to pack up my bags and go see my

Teacher.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Who wants you to?”

The corners of Fanlu’s lips lifted to a smirk. “Fine, you don’t let me accompany you, so I’ll go accompany some other woman.”

Zuiju abruptly turned around. “You’re so annoying! If you want to go, then go. Don’t bother me.”

While the two seethed, Fanlu’s subordinate hurried inside. He reported, “Sir, Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng have arrived at the residence entrance.”

Fanlu knew the two men were satisfied with their indulgences and came back to make trouble again. His eyebrows furrowed slightly, and his voice became serious. “Understood. You first go prepare the guest room and attend to them properly. Find a few pretty ladies to accompany them while they drink. Just don’t let them bother me.”

The subordinate noted down the instructions and left.

Zuiju curiously asked, “You ought to see those eyebrows of yours. Who dares to make Governor so upset?”

“Two very annoying bed bugs.” Fanlu didn’t want to say any more, so he returned to his slovenly look. “Just ignore those annoying bed bugs. We haven’t finished yet.”

“What ‘we’? You’re you and I’m me.”

“Sigh, I surrender.” Fanlu came in a bit closer, lowering his voice. “I have a secret to tell you, which could be regarded as a sin. Want to listen?”

“What secret?”

“That laundry maid who cleans poorly was specially arranged by me. I knew that someone would stupidly fall for it and re-wash my clothes again...ow, don’t hit, don’t hit me. I told you not to hit me. Why are you still hitting me so hard? Oi, I’m going to fight back...”

After the confession, Fanlu spent ages trying to cheer Zuiju up until she was

willing to listen. Most of the tension in Fanlu's heart had dispersed. He looked up at the sky, only to realise that he unwittingly wasted half the day. He stood up and stretched, "I'd better stop playing with you and go do paperwork. The peasants of Qierou's peaceful daily lives all depends on me."

Zuiju narrowed her eyes at him, "What a bragger. Hurry up and go then."

"I'll come here in the evening for dinner."

"I refuse."

Seeing that she had dropped her guard, Fanlu lightly pinched her on the cheek. "Then you come to my place for dinner."

By the time Zuiju fumed up again, Fanlu strode off far away.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 65

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch65

Dong Lin, inside a hidden valley.

Chu Beijie and Pingting's alliance brought up the fallen morale. After the military conference ended, each of the generals seemed to have a new goal as they stepped out of the tent. It seemed like their footsteps had become much lighter.

But at the same time, everyone understood they were taking a huge risk too. The Duke of Zhen-Bei and Pingting's strategies were both bold and dangerous. There wasn't any room for the slightest error.

After the discussion ended, Chu Beijie pulled Pingting from the crowd heading outside the tent. "How could Advisor Bai not stay by after exhibiting such talent to me, the Main Advisor, just now?"

Pingting turned and smiled, "Duke, don't forget our bet. Pingting won, so Duke isn't allowed to touch Pingting's hand for ten days."

Chu Beijie's eyes suddenly flashed, not hesitating to draw the Divine Spirit sword from his waist. He handed it to Pingting, "Pingting might as well cut me ten times, replacing the promised ten days."

Pingting was taken aback by the sword's reflection. She hurriedly put the sword back in its scabbard, frowning, "Duke's desperate measure isn't going to work. You were the one who provoked Pingting first, having a map of Qierou already hidden. Your intent to test me is quite obvious. What if Pingting hadn't been able to answer, utterly shaming herself?"

Chu Beijie lowered his voice, "It's not a desperate measure. Not being able to

touch your hand for ten days, especially when you're right in front of me, is more painful than ten sword cuts. Longing is bitter, a pain than comes from the inside. I would rather take the easy route, fairly and justly." His handsome face was earnest.

Pingting's heart trembled at his words. She lowered her head. It was ages before she said in a barely audible volume, "Even if the promise of ten days is dissolved, Duke shouldn't touch Pingting's hand every day at every possible moment." She thought for a moment, unable to hide her angry flush. She scowled, "Duke is far too aggressive, forcing Pingting to make that bet. No, Pingting must pay back this hatred." Her energetic eyes lifted slightly, looking both sweetly and angrily as she glared at him.

Chu Beijie saw this as a gentle charming expression. His mouth lifted into a smile as he whispered, "Tell me where you're going."

At this question, Pingting's face dimmed slightly. She softly said, "I should go see genius Doctor Huo. Zuiju..." She softly sighed, her eyes already red.

Chu Beijie's heart suddenly burst in pain.

After the two's reunion, Pingting seemed to have a bitter recollection of the past, mentioning it occasionally. Every time she did, she only mentioned a few words at a time, unwilling to describe in detail.

Yet he deeply understood the damage of the ups and downs had not yet healed. Zuiju's death added another blow to Pingting.

That year, what on earth happened on the icy snowcapped Songsen Mountains that caused this kind of tragedy?

Was their child also buried under that mass of white snow?

But he didn't dare ask Pingting whether their poor child actually died or not. To Pingting, that must be unbearable pain.

"I'll come with you." Chu Beijie tightly held onto Pingting's hand.

Pingting slowly shook her head, "Forgive me, Duke. Pingting would like to talk alone to Zuiju's Teacher."

"Pingting..."

“If from now on...Pingting really needs something,” Pingting raised her head, her eyelashes rising unsteadily as she looked at Chu Beijie, “Duke will definitely be by Pingting’s side, right?”

Chu Beijie was jolted defenceless by her delicately pitiful gaze. His heroic courage seemed to drain out as he solemnly promised, “Definitely.”

Pingting smiled. She gently pulled out the little finger from inside Chu Beijie’s palm, hooking it around her own. She then turned to leave.

Chu Beijie stood and watched her leave the tent. As his mood fell, he suddenly felt the peculiar feeling of being watched.

He was no ordinary person. When he knew someone was watching, his alertness suddenly returned his heart. He turned around and began to chuckle. He spread his arms open while helplessly saying, “If Sister-in-Law wants to laugh, go ahead. As the saying goes, there is always one thing to conquer another. I can never do anything when in front of Bai Pingting.”

The various generals in the tent had already left, but the Queen remained behind, propped up on a chair. There was laughter in her smile, “Duke of Zhen-Bei is too modest. That desperate measure struck me as quite a good choice. How could you say you can’t do anything? Gentleness has always been the grave of heroes, so perhaps the beloved women who resist their men will all be like Duke of Zhen-Bei.” Her gaze slowly drifted to somewhere beyond the tent door. It seemed to mix in the wind in the sky, instantly flying across thousands of miles, reaching to the far away Dong Lin Royal Residence’s location with its former striking and luxurious designs.

She thought of the top-notch alcohol, food, and the central hall decorated in gold. It seemed all like an illusion now.

She accompanied the King for many years but only deeply realised what she felt during the very last occasion where they parted.

She wasn’t only the Queen of Dong Lin but also the wife of this man.

After the last of the Dong Lin Royal House disappeared before her eyes, she realised what made her remember, the feelings between him and her.

Dong Lin was not relevant, the Royal House was not relevant, nor was the King

and Queen.

Only husband and wife, him and her.

For those virtuous customs, she had often uncontrollably wanted to clench onto his hand and embrace him, yet she had thought of her rank as the Queen. She held back on her desire to indulge in his love.

“Sister-in-Law?”

“Eh?” The Queen mumbled, suddenly coming back to her sense. She called, “Duke of Zhen-Bei, please come to my side.”

Chu Beijie took two steps, sitting down beside her.

“Are you planning to classify Dong Lin’s soldiers as a part of the Ting Army?” The Queen of Dong Lin asked.

Chu Beijie originally intended to make this clear with his sister-in-law. He frankly nodded, saying, “Yes.”

“Ting Army...” The Queen of Dong Lin held the words, as if chewing it in her mouth. She smiled bitterly, “That day, the King once said the Duke of Zhen-Bei is too sincere for a man and wasn’t quite suited to live in a heartless Royal House. He was worried about that the most, but now, I don’t quite know whether to worry or rejoice over Duke of Zhen-Bei’s current disposition. After all, without the immense love for Bai Pingting, how could Duke of Zhen-Bei magically conjure the Ting army, willing to oppose He Xia?” She then changed the subject, asking, “I want to confirm this matter. Suppose Dong Lin’s soldiers assimilate into the Ting army... If the Ting army was to win in the future, Duke of Zhen-Bei will have great power but what will Dong Lin’s fate be? What about the Dong Lin Royal House?”

Chu Beijie was silent for a moment. He clenched his teeth, “To be honest, Sister-in-Law, I will create a new country, with a new name.”

“Then Dong Lin...”

“Dong Lin is already a thing of the past. I’m not doing this for Dong Lin but to give Pingting a peaceful world to live in. If Dong Lin gained all the glory after this mess settled, then that officially means Dong Lin conquered the other three

countries. What difference is that to He Xia? The other three countries would secretly hold anger in their heart, waiting for the right time to attack. There'll never be true peace in the world." Chu Beijie's eyes were determined as he solemnly added, "This is my promise to Pingting, and it will never be changed."

The Queen of Dong Lin's gaze suddenly turned sharp, studying Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie didn't avoid her gaze in the slightest. He faintly added, "If Sister-in-law is angry, feel free to punish Chu Beijie but my decision has been set."

The Queen of Dong Lin studied him carefully for a long time until her sharp expression gradually faded. She helplessly side, "The fundamental roots of a country has always been its people, correct?"

"Sister-in-Law?" Chu Beijie felt stunned.

"Where can you possibly find a wall that doesn't let wind pass through at all? The conversation between Princess Yaotian and the Duke of Zhen-Bei before the war at Yun Chang has been inquired by many people." The Queen of Dong Lin wryly smiled, revealing a look of recollection. "When the Royal Residence was burned, I couldn't help but often wonder how my Dong Lin looked like, when it was first established. Perhaps there was a union of some sort, one whose people didn't hesitate to shed blood so they could look forward to seeing his wife and children, happily living through their daily lives, right?"

Why is, after hundreds of years, a country engraved in the heart yet its people were forgotten?

Hundreds and tens of thousands of people, hundreds and tens of thousands of deaths, had all been tangled up in it.

The Queen of Dong Lin's slow gaze swept past Chu Beijie's face. She sighed, suddenly making her decision. "While country is important, what good is it to think lives are worthless? Without peasants living out their lives in peace, country means death. Duke of Zhen-Bei, just go do what you want."

Chu Beijie hadn't expected the Queen would make her choice so decisively. He fiercely stood up and knelt on one knee. He articulated, "I will forever remember Sister-in-Law's grace." He hadn't expected the most difficult hurdle to be broken through so easily.

“Go. Settle the chaos, so that life is no longer trampled on, returning peace to this world.” The Queen of Dong Lin’s lips raised into a faint smile, a trace of longing escaping into it. “Peasant or royalty, everyone wants the same. As people who have the privilege of being born human, we should all know our lives are precious and should know we shouldn’t be trampled on by others like ants.”

The Duke of Zhen-Bei would establish a vast new empire.

This empire’s vastness wouldn’t come from its troops. Every single person in the country would know how to respect themselves, not look down upon themselves.

They would not see each other as puppets nor tools for others.

They would never be forced to walk on a battlefield.

When the threat of war loomed, they could choose whether they wanted to fight to protect their future, like today’s Ting army.

And if their red blood fell onto the battlefield, that patch of earth seeped in blood would grow the lushest green grass for the future.

“Bai Pingting,” The Queen of Dong Lin raised her head, sighing at the skies. “An amazing Bai Pingting.”

Gui Le, twilight rustled.

There was no longer the soft fragrance, that both bees and butterflies enjoyed, for the people in the Cold Palace.

The lock untouched for so long began to softly clink. The Queen of Gui Le, wearing tattered clothing, slowly lifted her head. She saw a majestic yet familiar figure.”

The King of Gui Le, He Su, stepped through the door. “Your older brother Le Zhen was defeated by Fei Zhaoxing. In fear of Yun Chang army attacking again, he led the remnants far away from the capital to escape.”

His tone was calm, surprisingly not angry.

The Queen of Dong Lin was imprisoned for many days, so this was the first time she heard the news of her brother. She was silent for a moment before coldly asking, “Is King here to bestow death on me?”

He Su didn't make a sound for a long time. He walked towards his wife and extended his index finger and then as if from the time he was still affectionate. He began to stroke her thinned chin.

"Queen, do you not want to see Shao'er?" He Su suddenly asked.

The Queen of Gui Le shook at this, looking at He Su in disbelief. "King...will let me see Shao'er?" Her son was her heart, after all. Her voice trailed off.

"Why wouldn't I let you?" He Su sighed, answering with another question.

The Queen knew she would die, most likely poisoning by dagger or alcohol. She made her decision to accept that. But she hadn't expected He Su to come personally. His words and actions were so different from her imagination. Her heart couldn't help soften, as they have been married for so many years, in addition to mentioning their son. Her face could never muster the coldness from before so she lowered her head, faintly replying, "I secretly revealed King's ambush, my father monopolised power, and my brother defied the royal Order, using the army as he wished to go against King. The charges the Le family are guilty of...are all worthy of a death sentence."

"Queen also knows of her own crime?" He Su thought of the current situation of Gui Le and couldn't help coldly harrumph. When seeing the Queen's head lowered in silence, he sighed softly again. "Get up, Queen. I'll forgive your sins. You are ordered to return to the Royal Residence, as the master of the harem."

"What?" The Queen raised her head in surprise.

Le Zhen leading the troops against the capital was no different from rebellion. This was the most treacherous crime against royalty, one that could never be forgiven.

But He Su's expression didn't seem to have the slightest trace of a joke.

The Cold Palace was particularly dark at night. He Su's figure stood in front of the door, so very close, yet she could not see the slightest bit in the depths of his eyes. It felt like he was far away, only leaving a mass of blurry shadow.

The Queen thought how her relationship with her husband was already broken down to an irreparable state. She lowered her head again, grinding her teeth, "King should still kill me. I was married the Royal House when I was fifteen. When

King ascended to the throne, I was immediately crowned as Queen. Thinking of our love from back then, I can't imagine how we have ended up like this today. It's all become a done deal, irreversible, so even if King forgives me, I would never have the face to be Queen once more. I really do regret it, the jealousy I had to get someone to warn He Xia of the ambush for a mere Bai Pingting. Even if she was taken into the harem, what did it matter as long as King was happy? For a single woman, Gui Le has become a mess, I...I really was stupid..."

Her shoulder began to dramatically tremble as she collapsed onto the ground, weeping.

As the Queen, she had been raised and ever lived in the residence. He Su was really the only man she held in her heart. In the past, they dined the best cuisine together, surrounded by servants, discussed various matters every day-including her father and brother. But the Queen just had to scheme below the surface, deliberately fulfilling her own selfish desires.

From the moment her red clothes faded and her hands becoming too lazy to comb her black hair, she listlessly stared at passing clouds in the Cold Palace. She would occasionally remember the past, often the most trivial of things.

She'd remember how she gingerly stepped into the Prince's Residence for the first time, how she saw He Xia for the first time as he slowly lifting red veil on their wedding night. She remembered how excited she had been as she lovingly murmured into He Xia's ear about her belly having his flesh and blood. She too remembered how she dressed up to receive the Queen's seal in front of many witnesses.

How did this couple step towards such national hate? Why had the string of fate, which they should have already tied for life, constantly tangle or be cut by the slightest heartache and ultimately leave nothing behind?

The Queen wept so much that it felt like her insides were breaking. She felt a gentle touch on her shoulder from two large palms.

The Queen lifted up her tear-stained face, as He Su held her up.

"Don't cry any more, Queen. I'll be honest, Le Zhen secretly fled with the army, leaving the capital empty. He Xia has already led the army of Yun Chang here, completely besieging us."

The Queen was taken aback, “What?” She had been imprisoned for a long time. No one dared to pass on the outside news, so she had no idea the situation worsened.

“One’s strength is meaningless when knowing defeat is certain; I’d rather not fight this battle. Tomorrow at this time, I will open the gates, personally delivering a letter of surrender to He Xia.” He Su smiled bitterly, “The country’s capital is almost gone, so why shouldn’t I forgive the betrayal crimes of the Queen and the Elder Statesmen?”

The Queen could hear her husband’s words were full of deprivation and helplessness. His attitude was very different from his former chilly pride, causing her heart to ache and regret. Her voice quivered, “If it weren’t for my mistake, Gui Le wouldn’t’ve had civil strife and King would have had the army. How could He Xia possibly come so easily? I...”

“Don’t say any more.” He Su cut off her words as he lowered his words. “The maids are holding onto your clothes and ornaments. They are waiting outside the door. Queen should properly dress up like she used to. It’s been a long time since you’ve accompanied me while I drink alcohol. Tonight will be ours, not to be disturbed by outsiders.

The Queen quietly studied He Xia before finally bowing. “Yes.”

He Su turned to leave. There indeed were maids waiting outside. Once the King left, they swam in like fish. Each held a tray. On them were the Queen’s favourite clothes and accessories, even rouge and powders, complete with coloured incense.

“Queen.” The crowd of maids obediently kowtowed upon seeing the long-lost Queen’s appearance. Each face seemed dark with sadness. The news of the King’s surrender to He Xia had spread through the Royal Residence.

After she bathed and dressed, the Queen carefully drew her eyebrows. She made sure she was dressed like a goddess before heading for the King’s chamber.

He Su had indeed ordered his men to prepare food and alcohol. He was on the other side of the bead curtain, drinking as he watched the scenery under the moon.

The scenery was beautiful, the dishes were warm, and the alcohol was warm. Thinking how she was still imprisoned in the Cold Palace a moment ago, this seemed like a dream. She could only sigh at life's unpredictability.

The two people had infinite thoughts in their minds as they quietly sat, drinking a few cups. He Su asked, "Why isn't Queen saying anything?"

"I..." The Queen's face, which she had drawn on very finely, was rather confused. "I don't know what to say."

He Su carefully assessed his wife's face. He broke into laughter, "I just suddenly thought that ever since becoming the master of the harem, you are the most beautiful today."

At such praise, the Queen's heavy heart floated lightly for a few moments, as if her body had a lot more hazy white mist. She bowed slightly, "One can only see the most clearly when their heart is without distractions. Maybe it's because today I will never have to pretend or have anything to hide from King."

"Well said." He Su raised his cup, "Today's Queen makes me remember the Queen that first entered the Prince Residence. Time sure flies; we've been husband and wife for so many years already." His tone was inadvertently gentle as all those years ago.

The Queen's face revealed a touched surprise. "King...you still remember how I looked when first entering the Prince Residence?"

"How could I forget?"

"Really..." The Queen raised a hand to touch her hair. She softly asked, "To be honest, I remember it too."

The Prince Residence, the Prince He Su of that time.

There was joyous music, humorous jokes, and delightful qin sound.

A group of young friends at first, prominent families of Gui Le. They gathered, practicing swordsmanship, playing qin, or discussing literature, art, or politics. The ones who clapped would clap and the ones who joked would joke. Yangfeng had always been in the Prince Residence, while He Xia and Pingting had become regulars.

The Le family had strict policies. She was the Crown Princess hence her identity was different from the others. She couldn't laugh and mess around with the others, only lean against the heavy wall and listen to the faint sounds of laughter that came through.

Once.

The King remembered everything from back then.

But did the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, He Xia, the leader of the army currently surrounding the capital, remembered too?

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 66

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch66

The scarlet sun rose from the east of the capital.

The light replaced the gentleness of the moon, the dominating dawn. As if mocking everyone's heavy hearts, it casted its light on the people, the capital of Yun Chang, as well as the raised flags of Yun Chang fluttering in the wind.

Under siege.

After today, the glamorous dances and sophistication of the famous Gui Le would cease to exist.

Under the shining blades of the Yun Chang army, the heavy city gates began to open inch by inch.

The King of Gui Le, He Su, brought along the Queen and other important officials of Gui Le behind him. The crown had been removed and shoes taken off, as they walked out of the gates. They were stopped from going any further, afraid of the soldiers' long spears on the two sides of the road. The kneeling figures with tears in their eyes, struggling to restrain themselves from weeping, were the numerous peasants of Gui Le.

The country had been destroyed.

Everything was over.

The Jing-An Ducal Residence was gone in flames overnight, rapidly spreading the news of the deeply respected Marquess of Jing-An rebelling and being driven out of the country. Today, the Marquess of Jing-An returned, but their country had ended instead.

On the plains outside the Yun Chang capital, He Su stood before the Yun Chang

army. He abandoned his supreme identity, kneeling before his enemy.

“He Su is a sinner, incompetently leading Gui Le, resulting in the peasants’ hardship. Since ancient times, treasures are only given to those with power, so He Su is willing to give the Great Seal of Gui Le to Prince Consort of Yun Chang, to represent surrender.”

His tone was solemn, every word squeezed out from the back of his throat. He Su held the Great Seal with both hands, slowly raising it as he passed it over.

A country heirloom, more important than thousands of gold.

He Su knelt as he lifted the Great Seal above his head, his arms slightly trembling.

He never once thought the huge Gui Le would be ruined in his hands.

During the last moments of his dying father, he secretly urged, “You have to be extremely careful when it comes to anything regarding the House of Jing-An.”

Indeed he had been careful, plotting immediately after ascending to the throne. He carefully arranged every movement, device, assembly set, and the ruthless burning of the Jing-An Ducal Residence to the last blade of grass. He pursued them hard, eventually killing the Duke of Jing-An and the Duchess of Jing-An, only leaving a He Xia behind.

Quite ironically, today, he finally realised the depths of what “extremely careful” meant.

The Queen and the thousand generals were pale, each looking as if their souls were lost, as they knelt behind He Su.

The Yun Chang army was neat and quiet, as their weapon blades gleamed harshly.

He Xia’s expression seemed refreshed, in high spirits. He held the reins in one hand as his gaze slowly looked down, glancing the Great Seal quite unexcitedly. The corners of his lips rose, “Put it away.”

One of his trusted soldiers answered, “Yes.” He got off the horse and came over.

He Su could only feel the weight in his hand lighten, realising the Great Seal

was already placed in someone else's hand. He felt Gui Le now truly belonged to someone else. The energy in his limbs vanished, almost causing him to collapse onto the ground.

Now that the country had fallen, how could he go see his ancestors?

But no matter how upset he was at that moment, he couldn't not care about the overall situation, the life and death of the people behind him. In front of He Xia, he could only reluctantly bow, bearing the pain. "Please feel free to enter the capital, Prince Consort of Yun Chang and his troops. The Royal Residence has already been cleared, ready for Prince Consort of Yun Chang to use."

He Su felt a strange feeling on his back. He knew He Xia was sitting on the horse, watching him condescendingly.

After a long time, he heard a familiar voice above his head, slowly saying, "Back when we studied together, I remember Mister say if the monarch of a fallen country wants to express their sincerity, they will generally personally serve the victor, following every command regardless of how brutal. I wonder if King is truly sincere towards He Xia?"

Unease rippled amongst the officials of Gui Le, He Su's expression twisting.

Memories weren't enough, as this was a revenge of hatred seeped in old roots. It seemed He Xia not only wanted his life, but also wanted to humiliate him in front of other people in every possible way.

He's like a knife. I am the fish meat. My death is not enough, but...

He Su's fists tightly clenched, hidden inside his sleeves. He lowered his head and gritted his teeth, "Please allow He Su to welcome Prince Consort into the city to show sincerity."

"King..." The Queen gasped softly from behind, quietly beginning to sob.

The other elderly officials also began to cry.

"Don't say any more." He Su decided to cut off the queen, enduring the humiliation. He stood up from the ground, as if stepping on thorns, and began to step one by one towards He Xia's horse. He reached out for the bridle.

He had yet touch the bridle when something suddenly lashed out in front,

lightly stopping him. It turned out to be the whip.

He Su raised his head, not understanding, thinking that it was another way to make his life difficult.

He Xia was cold again, “Although I hate you, that’s all.” He waved his hand, raising his voice, “Enter the city! We won’t go to the Royal Residence, just to the Jing-An Ducal Residence.”

“Enter the city!”

“Enter the city!”

“Enter the city...”

The words were passed on from soldier to soldier. The intonations rose and fell, resembling a never-stopping echo.

The Yun Chang army began to slowly move into the capital of Gui Le like a massive beast that just awoke from its slumber.

He Xia sat on the horse, followed by the royal flag, surrounded by his soldiers. He Su and the thousands of officials painfully trudged behind them.

Once entering the city, the unfamiliar yet familiar feeling raged towards He Xia. This ancient city was the place he grew up in, played in its alleys and rode happily on its roads.

Gui Le, Gui Le’s Jing-An Ducal Residence, Gui Le’s Marquess of Jing-An.

Gui Le’s two qin players, Gui Le’s Yangfeng, Gui Le’s Bai Pingting.

How on earth did all of this happen?

No one could understand what He Xia felt.

This was the first time he’d formally went through the Gui Le capital gates after the Jing-An Ducal Residence fell.

He Xia had achieved his vow for revenge, but for some reason, he realised that this didn’t quench the pain and dissatisfaction he felt about the time lost from then at all.

He had the Gui Le capital. This capital no longer had the Jing-An Ducal Residence, no longer had the smiling faces of his parents, no longer had Pingting.

Only He Su remained, becoming his enemy for life.

He had avenged and won a country, yet who did he have to tell this piece of great news?

Even Yaotian was no longer here.

The sound of hooves sounded once more, carrying to his former home. When he stopped, it seemed the flowers were crying and birds were startled. Only a pile of rubble remained of the demolished building.

“After the Jing-An Ducal Residence was destroyed by fire, it was abandoned.”

He Xia dismounted, gazing at the moss-covered entrance for a long time. Finally, he stepped forwards, slowly climbing up the familiar stairs, stepping over his home’s threshold.

The past was fresh in his minds. The scene was busy as guests were invited in.

His father was in the hall, commenting politics with officials, while his mother was surrounded by maids who chatted about rather interesting events and rumours in the Royal Residence. Occasionally, He Xia would hurry in from outside and his mother would stand up from the chair, asking from the other side of the curtain, “Xia’er, there are lots of people outside as it’s rather busy. Be sure to go out with some guards, so that you won’t take off with Pingting alone.”

“Understood. I won’t go outside then. Prince He Su has sent messengers, saying the Prince Residence has a Mister who will talk about the art of war. We should go.”

“Since it’s like that, you can go. Don’t ride your horse in the city as it won’t be funny if you fall. It’s better to sit in the carriage.”

“Understood, Mother.”

“Also, if the art of war goes on for too long, and you have to eat at the Prince Residence, remember to come back...sigh...that child...”

She had yet to finish instructing. He Xia already excitedly rushed out the door. He looked for Pingting, not caring about what she was busy with, grabbed her hand, and ran. They’d bolt towards the horses at the gate, bringing down the whip until there was no longer any trace of them.

The memories seemed to be trapped by weeds in this place, both near and far. Every corner seemed to hold countless memories, lingering, unable to be rid of.

To forget, was something incredibly hard.

He Xia stopped in the courtyard, his handsome face as cold as ice. He ordered, "Prepare a banquet here, so that I can have a good drink in this Jing-An Ducal Residence."

He now held monstrous power, no one could neglect his smallest command.

The weeds were removed, the fallen leaves were swept. The mud-covered tiles gradually exposed their former gleam, while a mantle was placed above every door.

Red silk, green satin sheets were laid out while differently coloured mantles were round up around the abandoned pillars. They fluttered in the breeze, dancing brilliantly in the courtyard.

The residue of the fallen houses were cleared; new tables and chairs were set. Tea was served, topped with all sorts of fresh fruit.

The scarlet sun set, and the huge Jing-An Ducal Residence had been laid out. A whole day's worth of effort.

During sunset, the Jing-An Ducal Residence's rare antiques were brought out. Only a half of them were left behind after the fire, and it was strangely quite sentimental.

Drinks and dishes were served. He Xia sat in the courtyard, ordering his men to move a hundred feet back, guarding him from a distance.

The Queen of Gui Le was in charge of the jug. She quietly sat at one side, frowning but calm.

Only He Su was able to drink with him.

"Cheers." He Xia lifted his cup, clinking it in midair.

He Su was full of thoughts, but at this stage, he no longer had anything to tie him down. He wasn't afraid of death nor a cup of wine.

He too lifted the cup. "Cheers." He raised his head and drank, the acrid taste

heading straight down his throat.

The wine brought in sadness, making him even more unhappy.

He Su looked around, at the splendid arrangements, concealing the ruins of the Jing-An Ducal Residence. The root of everything was him. He Su couldn't help but heave a sigh, "I didn't think we would still be able to drink together."

The Queen trudged forwards, quietly filling their cups.

"You never know, do you?" He Xia unexpectedly smiled, asking He Su, "Do you not know why I invited you to drink?"

"No."

The two had known each other for a long time. In their youth, they could be said to be childhood friends. Neither expected today. Their sharp gazes hit each other.

He Xia held the cup up. In a deep voice he said, "I want to thank you."

"Thank me?"

He Xia's handsome features seemed to be shrouded in a thin layer of smoke, not allowing anyone to see the depths of the bitterness in his eyes. "Who else am I to thank, apart from you, for the reason why I am so majestic today?"

He never thought this day would come.

He used to be the suave, romantic, happy and respected Marquess of Jing-An amongst the four countries.

He had a country to protect, a home to return to, had his parents, Pingting and Dongzhuo to be around with, received the adoration of millions of soldiers. He was prepared to shed blood to fight for his beloved Gui Le.

But everything quickly changed, without any time to breathe. He Xia would never forget the moment he watched the sky burn with the flames in the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

The Queen of Gui Le quietly sat at one side. She could see the boundless hatred under He Xia's calm expression. A shiver ran up her spine.

He Su smiled instead. He lowered his voice, "Are you hating me for getting rid

of the Jing-An Ducal Residence? That's right, you grew up with me and I respected the Duke of Jing-An as my elder. That day, to protect the royal authority, I was too cruel."

He Xia said, "No need to explain, I understand."

"You do?"

"That's right, I do." He Xia raised his head, drinking another cup.

Bitter alcohol. Each cup following the next all held bitter alcohol.

He Su ruined the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Yet he, the honourable and respected Marquess of Jing-An, used poison to murder in Bei Mo, killing his favourite maid Pingting and the Royal Residence of Yun Chang. He cried while listening to Yaotian, his pregnant wife, die.

How could he not understand?

The sky was darkening from the sunset, leaving a faint glow in the clearing.

He Xia raised his cup, cheering the people who ruined his House of Jing-An. Each cup was bitter.

The rubble from the demolished building around him made his heart ache until it was crazed. It was all thanks to these people, yet he was in this sacred place, drinking next to them.

Because, he couldn't find anyone who could share this bitter alcohol, share this deserted Jing-An Ducal Residence with.

Who else?

Where were his parents? Where was Pingting?

And where was his wife who granted his military power, Yaotian?

Time wasn't kind enough to stop, passing by with a sigh. The dusk fell, quietly closing in. The guards remained utterly silent as candles were lit around them.

The two drank in silence, the Queen continuing to serve the wine.

He Su never looked at the Queen. He simply lifted his cup to drink without expression. When he lifted his head to look at the sky, the moon had already

passed the transit.

He hardened his heart, putting down his empty cup on the table. He generously said, "Time's up. Go on, whether it's poison or knife. I promise you, I'm willing to commit suicide as long as my wife and son will be safe."

There was a clang as the silver jug fell onto the tiles, spilling alcohol everywhere.

The Queen of Gui Le froze on the spot, suddenly wailing. "King! King you... you..." She fell before He Su's feet, biting her purple lips but was unable to express a single word.

She knew surrendering was their only chance of escape, but she hadn't expected her husband would offer his life to He Xia to exchange for hers.

The night before, she felt they finally walked on the same path, but at this moment, her chest seemed to have been smashed by a hammer, so painful she would rather die.

He Xia looked at the Queen of Gui Le weeping at feet. A vague hint of nostalgia passed on his face, but it quickly left as soon as it came. His expression turned cold and solemn once more, "This woman seized power, causing political chaos to Gui Le. She made you lose everything, yet you would still protect her. What a ridiculous mess of a relationship, totally unlike you."

He Su listened and looked down as his wife crying in distraught. His expression revealed a little bit of warmth as he whispered, "I really did hate her for Le Zhen's rebellion. Two or three times after imprisoning her, I thought of sending an Order to force her suicide. I even once thought before handing the letter of surrender to Prince Consort of Yun Chang, I would kill her before my own death."

He dragged out a long sigh, then continued, perhaps to answer He Xia or only to himself, "The surrender letter has made it clear that I am willing to commit suicide as long as two lives of my Royal House are spared. As a father, my heart belongs to my child so why cannot I commit suicide for Shao'er? But as for the second person I wanted to protect, I thought again and again, until the end, the one I really wanted to exchange my life to protect, was still her..."

"King!" The Queen raised her head as she mournfully cried, choking, "It's my

fault! I really deserve death!”

“You don’t deserve death. Shao’er has already lost his father, how could he lose his mother to?” He Su sadly smiled. Since ascending to the throne, he was surrounded by numerous beauties due to holding the royal power, causing him to become increasingly cold towards the Queen. Yet now, when death was before his eyes, he realised the woman who had been staying by his side for all these years was the one person his heart was unwilling to leave. He softened his voice, “On our wedding night, I promised to love and protect only you in my lifetime. I have forgotten that promise over these days. But today, I don’t know why I suddenly remembered it. Don’t cry, Queen, I am merely fulfilling my promise.”

He Xia stood at one side, coldly observing them.

He had come to bring hate, crusading into Gui Le. On the way, the Yun Chang army had been invincible, not a single battle lost, until sieging the city. He wanted to force He Su’s suicide quickly, so he could mock them to the last minute and let his heart be amused.

He didn’t expect this wasn’t the soul-healing elixir he wanted to cure the hurt in his heart. Entering the city and seeing the barrenness of the Jing-An Ducal Residence made him feel regret and helplessness.

He Xia just quietly stood at the side, watching He Su softly saying goodbye to his wife, the Queen’s grief too much for her body. He turned to his side where there was no one. The ruins of his home scantily decorated with fine silks and satins were printed in the depths of his eyes. The lonely wind lingered.

A hatred from being betrayed by those people began to crash into his heart like a volcanic eruption.

“King may not have to die. For our friendships in our childhood, I will now give you a chance.” He Xia sneered, “As long as one of the three members of the Gui Le Royal House is willing to commit suicide, I will allow the other two to live, including King himself.”

The Queen of Gui Le hadn’t expected this sudden chance. She suddenly stopped crying, turning to look at He Xia. She earnestly asked, “Is Marquess of Jing-An saying the truth?” If it was true, than as long as she committed suicide,

then her husband and her son would be spared.

He Xia had yet to reply, when He Su solemnly answered, “No need to say any more, Queen. The decision has already been made, there isn’t any need to change it.”

He Xia hadn’t expected He Su to be so decisive. His face suddenly changed as his hand pressed against the sword hilt, continuing to sneer.

Every word, action, and expression between these two people reminded him of Yaotian. It stabbed at his heart with the intention to kill.

“King,” The Queen of Gui Le’s eyes were red as she sobbed, “It doesn’t matter anything if I die, but if only King could...”

“Could what?” He Su stared at her, a deep coldness hid in his eyes. Seeing that she cried until her face was tearstained, he couldn’t help bend down, gently wiping away her tears away. He knew this was the last chance he could talk to his wife. His voice was utterly gentle. “As your husband, how could I not protect you? Where on earth can you find a husband who can bear watching his wife die before him?”

He didn’t know that his careless remark was like a sharpened knife stabbing straight into He Xia’s heart.

Where on earth could you find a husband who could bear watching his wife die before him?

He Xia listened, his head buzzing as if someone had erupted. His vision was emptied.

His body shook a few times. He barely managed to steady himself. Sweat oozed out from his palm, dripping onto the sword hilt he touched. He pulled it out without hesitation, grinded his teeth. “Damn you all.”

He Su abruptly looked up, the sword light already reaching into his eyes. He was born crown prince so although he was afraid of He Xia’s abilities, he was still a man with resolute pride. He had long made up his mind to give up his life to protect his wife and son, so he stood in the same place with closed eyes, without panic or fear as he waited for the jolt of pain to come.

He Xia swung his sword down as his anger rose even more. He saw He Su's eyes closed, waiting for his death with such a dignified air. He simply felt that he deserved much more than a single sword cut. His gaze turned, falling on the Queen who was still flying in midair to block the King's body from being hit.

His swordsmanship was excellent. He immediately turned with the sword which then pierced without excess movement.

"Ahhh!" A scream was heard.

He Su suddenly opened her eyes wide. When he looked down, his wife had already fallen in a pool of blood.

"Queen! Queen!" He Su knelt down, holding the Queen in his arms, his voice already hoarse.

The Queen had been stabbed in the throat, and blood ejected like an arrow. Her body had already become limp, so there was no way she could make a sound. She opened her eyes, looking gratefully at He Su before slowly closing them again.

He Su saw her wrist hang down, never to make another movement again. He seemed to feel an icy coldness in his whole body. From the ground, he slowly raised his head towards He Xia, his eyes red. He spat out each word, "Why did you do that?"

The corners of He Xia's eyes twitched slightly, his face rather stupefied as if he had lost his own soul. His mouth sneered, however, "Let me tell you, there really are husbands who have watched their wife die before them."

"He Xia!" He Su roared, abruptly standing up. "Damn you to hell!" He thought his relationship with the Queen had become completely non-existent and never once thought watching the Queen die before him would cause his heart to shatter so much. The sudden pain seemed to drive away all of his reasoning as he charged towards He Xia. His two hands were outstretched, risking his life to pounce for He Xia's neck.

He Xia killed the Queen of Gui Le in one strike. Although his lips held a smile and his words were sharp as his sword, his heart was actually felt tipsy, as if the alcohol had gone to his head. He knew what he had done, yet he was unaware of

it at the same time.

He Su charged towards him. As the guards were a hundred feet away, they couldn't come to his aid immediately. He Xia's combat skills were excellent, not to mention he held a sword, so there was no way He Su could get close. He Xia saw the looming black figure, took a step back, and instinctively raised his sword to stab.

He only felt like he had been jolted awake from this dream until a surge of blood spilled all over his face. He finally clearly saw He Su coming close, his wasted dead eyes glaring angrily at him.

He had been stabbed in the chest by He Xia's long sword, instantly dying. He Xia released his grip, causing He Su's corpse and the sword to slowly flop beside the Queen of Gui Le.

"Prince Consort!"

"Prince Consort..." His bodyguards rushed over.

He Xia waved his hand, ordering them to withdraw.

In the empty courtyard of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, he was the only one left, standing alone.

The couple quietly laid in a pool of blood. At first glance, they seemed like people who had relentlessly used their life and death to ridicule He Xia, the man who now dominated the world.

He conquered the four countries, his calvary trampling over all the mountains and rivers, yet was actually being ridiculed by a pair of corpses?

Utterly ridiculous!

"Hahaha..." He Xia tossed his head back and laughed.

In the silent night, amongst the residues of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, waves of hollow laughter spread.

Couple?

Didn't this couple hate each other? If they didn't, then how could they rattle the entire country, vainly causing Gui Le's ruin?

“I’m just thinking, if the House of Jing-An hadn’t perished, would Yaotian still have been blessed enough to be the wife of Husband or not?”

The gentle voice was very familiar. He Xia turned abruptly. Nothing.

In the past, her smile was like flowers, slender fingers lifting the shaking bead curtain, revealing a pair of energetic eyes that deeply looked at him.

She had been on a carriage, quietly crying, been in the hall, modestly sitting and had been to the Prince Consort Residence, to accompany him while he drank or watched dance...

I really want to forget them.

Forget everything.

Until not one memory is left!

He Xia shuddered as he looked at He Su and the Queen’s corpses. Heavy air seemed to refuse to let him straighten his spine, nor fall to his knees.

He bent over in pain, hiding his eyes with his face.

Couldn’t forget it, he couldn’t forget it.

The Jing-An Ducal Residence ruined before his eyes after a great victory. No one stood by his side, no one felt happy for him, and no one felt sorry for him.

At this moment, he finally realized how much he missed Yaotian.

He thought of his wife as only a tool to gain power, who had died while pregnant with his child. He didn’t realize until now that he had always missed Yaotian.

When he received the full royal authority of Yun Chang, the distress in his heart felt so strong that it made him completely numb.

Lock.

The lock was on the door while Yaotian cried.

“No, no, I don’t want the physician. I want the Prince Consort...the Prince Consort...”

“Hurry, find someone to call the Prince Consort over. Make him come here...”

“Luyi, I want to see him...I won’t make it, I want to see him. Hurry, he won’t not see me...”

He Xia’s body began to quake.

Lock, lock.

The lock was on the door.

The heavy lock, locked another space, locked up powerful hatred.

Open it, open it. It was merely a lock, merely a wooden door, but inside was his wife and his flesh & blood.

“Open it! Open that lock! Hurry, smash it for me, smash it!” He Xia clutched to his head as he howled, his handsome face twisting in pain.

He had the four countries. The slightest beckon with the wave of his hand would be tended to with utmost care. He could busy himself, but it was helpless against the emptiness and deathly silence in his heart.

Everyone had heartlessly left.

Where was home?

Where were his loved ones?

Yaotian’s calls before her death were omnipresent, forcing their way into his ears.

“Open the lock...open the lock! Someone, open the lock!”

“Prince Consort? Prince Consort?”

Ears recognizing human voices, He Xia suddenly looked up, his gaze piercing.

The people in front of him carefully studied his expression. “What lock is Prince Consort commanding us to open? I will immediately go do it.”

His trusted bodyguard.

He Xia dazedly looked at him, gradually coming back to his senses. He sighed, straightening out his numbed body. His gaze flicked to the ground where He Su and his wife’s corpses had cooled, their blood clotting on the ground. He Xia studied the patch of red, his expression suddenly heartless as he ordered, “Kill

him.”

The soldier saw his expression and his heart trembled. He lowered his head to look at the freezing cold corpse of He Su, softly saying, “Report to Prince Consort, this man has already died.”

“No,” He Xia’s face was pale white. He widened his eyes, smiling mirthlessly, “Go, kill He Su’s prince. Not one of Gui Le’s Royal House is to be spared.”

His expression was so terrifying that even the soldier couldn’t help stiffen at the command. During their conversation, He Xia told He Su that as long as He Su was willing to commit suicide in surrender, he would let two of the Royal House live. Now that both He Su and the Queen had died, what need was there to kill an insignificant little prince?”

“Prince Consort, that Prince of Gui Le, didn’t you say...”

“What did I say?” He Xia fumed, “How dare you, to disobey my Order? Someone, take him away, twenty whacks with the army cane!” After a man had come to take away that soldier, he called someone up again, ordering, “Go kill the Prince of Gui Le, immediately! I refuse to let He Su’s son live.”

He already had the world. Why would he let his enemy’s son live, when his own flesh and blood had died?

He Su’s son had been locked up long ago, so it wasn’t hard to kill him.

Very soon, the soldier sent back to report, “Prince Consort, He Shao has been killed.”

He Xia processed this but without joy. He just said, “Oh really?” He quietly stood for a long time in the wind, before looking back at the guards around him. Each and every one of them watched him back quietly, the colour of horror in their eyes.

A burst of sadness hit He Xia’s heart. He softly asked, “That He Su agreed to commit suicide, but changed his mind at the last minute. The Queen resisted alongside him too, both attempting to kill me. That’s why I killed his son.” He thought of the soldier who had just talked to him, asking, “Where’s Tongcheng?”

“Report to Prince Consort, as Prince Consort ordered, he has been taken away

for twenty whacks with army cane. He is currently kneeling outside, awaiting further instructions from Prince Consort.”

He Xia said, “Give him medicine, let him rest for two days so he may properly heal.”

Looking around at the now strangely unfamiliar Jing-An Ducal Residence, he sighed again.

The target had been confirmed to be Qierou. After waiting for ten days, Chu Beijie’s party finally arrived.

While the crowd of generals were discussing matters in the army tent, Luoshang excitedly lifted the flap. “Bei Mo’s Hua Can has arrived.”

Everyone in the tent was delighted. “Welcome him in.”

The words had yet to fall, when Hua Can stepped in looking all dusty. He was one of the young generals who Ruohan promoted after Ze Yin’s retirement. Although he suffered the defeat at the Battle of Zhouqing, his spirit never dwindled. Even though his face was caked to a dark gray, the sparkle remained in his eyes. He scanned the tent, his eyes falling on Ruohan. “Main General,” he showed the gesture of submission towards Ruohan, enebetically. “I immediately set off after receiving Main General’s secret letter. The morale of Bei Mo is in its craze, so there were quite a lot of people finding our hidden recruiters.”

“Don’t jump right in to the report. Allow me to introduce these people first.” Ruohan was quite delighted seeing his subordinate. He beckoned towards the various generals, finally leading him to Chu Beijie. “This is the Duke of Zhen-Bei.”

Hua Can looked at Chu Beijie, wariness and respect flashing in his eyes.

Chu Beijie knew it wasn’t easy to lead this group of former enemies, so he wasn’t particularly offended by his expression. He studied Hua Can for a moment, asking, “How many did you lead here?”

Hua Can still felt rather uneasy making his report to Chu Beijie and gazed questioningly at Ruohan before replying, “Our base in Bei Mo has already collected quite a few people. Thinking the eyes and ears of the Yun Chang army might detect us on the way, I only led a thousand men here. Although most are newcomers to the battlefield, I can guarantee that they’re all good lads.”

Pingting had long heard Hua Can's arrival, sending her heart pounding without end. From beside Chu Beijie, she spoke out, unable to restrain her excitement, "Have you heard from Yangfeng yet?"

Hua Can's eyes swiveled, seeing a fine-looking woman standing beside Chu Beijie. Although she wasn't close to a stunning beauty, she had a sort of graceful elegance that radiated. He immediately guessed who she most likely was and replied, quite respectfully, "Yes, I have sent people to the address Miss wrote and found the Main General's wife."

Since Pingting helped Bei Mo against Dong Lin, the generals of Bei Mo were quite close to her so Hua Can's attitude to her was much more natural than to Chu Beijie.

Pingting hurriedly asked, "Are they all okay? When Yangfeng saw my letter, did she say anything?"

Hua Can smiled, "The Main General's wife said, everyone has their own aspirations, so she can't do anything but refuse Miss Bai's wish to let her and the children hide in the mountains in safety."

Pingting was a little stunned. She stared at Hua Can's smiling face. Her eyes suddenly lit up after a few moments. She softly exclaimed, "My god, she actually brought the children here!"

Several dozen white pigeons instantly fluttered their wings to lift off her heart, flying and scattering the fragrance of delight and surprise in every direction.

Yangfeng had come. Yangfeng who detested war and always wanted to avoid everything about it actually came.

Where were the children?

Changxiao, my Changxiao.

Pingting was suddenly heading straight towards the exit. When she got to the door, she suddenly stopped, hurried back, and pulled Chu Beijie outside by the hand.

She had always been calm, so this was a rare moment of excitement that even Chu Beijie couldn't quite comprehend. But since Pingting was the one who

obediently offered her little hand, there was no way Chu Beijie would let go of it. He allowed himself to be pulled towards the door while he asked, "Is this to welcome Yangfeng?" With one lift of the flap, the two people disappeared behind the door.

The generals watched the two disappear out of the army tent, both surprised and envious.

Hua Can stood on the spot for a while, turning to Ruohan to sigh, "This Miss Bai is amazing indeed. I wanted to keep her guessing, but she guessed it in one phrase."

Ruohan's mood was quite good. He patted him on the shoulder, laughing, "A pity, you didn't get to see what the Battle of Kanbu looked like."

He then went with Hua Can to attend the men and horses who arrived with food and water. There were many piled here and there on the grass, sleeping.

Pingting led Chu Beijie quickly to the entrance. She immediately spotted the swan-like Yangfeng in the crowd of chickens. Although her features showed exhaustion, not a trace of her gentle beauty was lost.

Yangfeng had also saw Pingting from afar. She waved to Pingting, chuckling, "Pingting."

"Yangfeng." Pingting yelled with delighted surprise. She let go of Chu Beijie, picking up both of Yangfeng's hands. She squeezed them.

She assessed Yangfeng from top to bottom. Although she didn't open her mouth to speak, the ripples of excitement couldn't be hidden in her eyes. The two held each other's hands, watching the other for a very long time before Pingting broke the silence. Her voice was rather critical as she sighed, "Geez, why didn't you listen to me? You should be running far away in a time of soldiers and weapons. It's very dangerous here."

"You're not willing to lie dormant yourself, so how could you ask others to do that too? I too must do what I want to do the most, that is, to come to the military camp and personally witness how this chaos will settle." Yangfeng's gentle face was much more determined than usual, as she faintly smiled, "I said it before didn't I? I will personally witness my husband's words become reality."

This firm expression, prior to losing Ze Yin, had never once appeared on Yangfeng's face before.

Pingting couldn't help but feel slightly surprised. She lowered her voice, "Then what about the children?"

Yangfeng had yet to reply, when a small head popped out from behind Yangfeng, revealing a broad grin. "Auntie!"

"Ze Qing, you've gotten taller." Pingting lovingly stroked his head, her own gaze unable to stop searching her surroundings.

Yangfeng knew who Pingting was looking for. She pursed her lips and smiled, "You don't need to search, over there." She pointed behind Pingting.

Children grew too fast. It hadn't been long, but Changxiao seemed to have grown a lot and seemed even more mischievous than Ze Qing now. He just arrived to an unfamiliar place but was curious about everything. He hadn't realized his Lady Mother had arrived and somehow slipped behind Pingting, coincidentally being attracted to another familiar object.

"Knife-knife..."

Changxiao had a very good memory. He once played with this dazzling shiny thing which caused Ze Qing to be hit by Yangfeng. He recognized it at first glance and clung around Chu Beijie's leg without any further explanation. He tried to grope for the Divine Soul sword on Chu Beijie's waist.

Chu Beijie lowered his head and saw this little thing trying to climb up his leg who then looked up at him. The thing had rather crystal-black pupils with a clear light in them and was trying to steal the precious sword on his waist. He wasn't afraid of the Duke of Zhen-Bei who no one else dared to lay a finger on.

This little kid sure had great courage.

Back then, even his brother's two princes didn't dare to so blatantly climb up him.

Chu Beijie carefully assessed this little thing. His nose was straight, his eyes were stubborn, and the more he studied it, the more he liked it. He suddenly thought of his and Pingting's child that had quietly been swallowed by fate,

sending ruthless bursts of pain into his heart.

He hadn't expected that both of Ze Yin's sons could walk now.

He felt deep envy in his heart.

He had never particularly liked children, but this time his heart softened. He couldn't help bend down to pick up Changxiao and playfully squeeze Changxiao's chubby little cheek. "What a naughty boy, why do you not obediently follow your mother?"

Changxiao, who had been too excited from his play, was reminded. He looked left and right, finally seeing that familiar figure. He instantly began to yell, "Mother!"

A very sweet and pleasant voice rang out as he waved with both hands in Pingting and Yangfeng's direction. He struggled to leave Chu Beijie's arms.

Chu Beijie realized he wasn't willing to let go, so he followed his gaze to look in Pingting and Yangfeng's direction, and Pingting happened to turn to look in their direction.

In the end, a mother's nature overrules everything. Hearing Changxiao's calls, Pingting's heart felt like it was being tightened by rope which slacked after cooling down her excitement from earlier. She could no longer hold back at that moment, her tears swelled up in her eyes as she walked towards Chu Beijie. "Changxiao, Changxiao, I really wanted to see you." Her eyes were filled with gentleness as she softly murmured, her tears hanging off her cheeks.

Changxiao did not seem understand the taste of parting. Seeing his mother, he was so happy he waddled in Pingting's arms, giggling.

Chu Beijie stood at one side, transfixed like a wooden chicken.

He was turned to stone, listening to the Changxiao in Pingting's arms, saying "Mother".

A rainbow suddenly lifted, painting right across the clouds of his mind, emitting colourful light. One band of colour, then the second, the third...

Numerous colours began to spin, tightly surrounding the bigger and smaller figures imprinted in his eyes. The sweetness and gentleness he felt at that

moment was so beautiful that he simply couldn't believe it to be true.

Pingting held onto Changxiao as she turned around. She returned Chu Beijie's gaze before lowering her head shyly, her expression rather apologetic. She whispered, "Duke, this is Changxiao."

Although this one sentence was softly said to him, it sounded more beautiful than the melody of the gods. Chu Beijie knew he would never, ever, forget these words. This dignified Duke of Zhen-Bei actually had the urge to burst into tears right there and then, in front of the huge crowds.

Changxiao, this was Changxiao.

Pingting's son.

His son too!

Chu Beijie's limbs seemed to have flown into the skies. He gaped at the happy mother and son in front of him. He didn't dare make a single expression nor did a muscle on his face twitch as they would all cause the emotion he felt to overflow, his tears of joy irrepressible.

This little guy was his and Pingting's...

Even though he tried for ages, trying to talk several times, he was too excited to speak a single word.

Pingting saw him like that and couldn't help give him a bit of an anxious look.

Changxiao turned his head to look at him, eyeing the Divine Spirit soul again. He delightedly shouted, "Knife-knife!" as he reached out in midair to climb onto Chu Beijie.

Yangfeng was holding onto Ze Qing, a smile in her lips as she watched at one side.

Chu Beijie's throat was dry and hoarse, numerous joyous songs roaring like waves. It seemed that he needed to jump right up and scream away the burning fire in his heart to the sky several times. But his body was uncontrollable, and it stayed rooted to the spot.

Finally, a few words were painstakingly squeezed out of his hoarse throat, "Wait a minute."

Pingting and the others were shocked as they watched Chu Beijie suddenly turn, rushing into one of the closest tents. Once he went in, the soldiers inside rapidly came out, each with a look of puzzled doubt, suggesting that Chu Beijie had driven them away.

The crowd circled the tent. There was suddenly a violent sound shattering the wind.

Fwaah, fwaaah...

Even those across the tent could clearly hear the sharp sound of wind breaking continuously.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei seemed to be maniacally waving his sword.

The thick tent skin was trembling, as if the tent was about to split apart any time soon.

After a while, the sword seemed sound and stopped. The earth seemed to have silenced too.

Flap! The tent door was violently lifted, shocking the nervously waiting crowd with its force.

Chu Beijie was covered in sweat as he strode out from inside. His hand was pressed on the Divine Spirit sword, his gaze piercing. The confidence of the Duke of Zhen-Bei pretty much returned, but his red eyes said otherwise.

He headed towards Pingting, staring at Changxiao. He rightfully took over and began to hug him, "Good son, call me Father."

Changxiao was quite stubborn. He was usually never this obedient. Perhaps of their connection by blood did he surprisingly agree. He really did, quite delightedly, say, "Father." He then looked down to play with Chu Beijie's cloak.

Chu Beijie felt his heart scream in joy with his word, "Father". At the same time, it felt like his throat clogged even more as he hugged Changxiao tightly. The small and soft body felt light, and he felt like the hand that gripped his sword mustn't touch this little thing or it would crumble.

It was so fragile that it was sad.

But it was this fragile little life, this tender call of "Father", that made even the

most sturdy of weapons or cavalry made him brim with confidence. Chu Beijie's nose felt both sour and painful, as he felt his son in his arms. The overwhelming joy of being a father flooded into him. His high spirits made him burst out laughing.

Who in the world was more fortunate than him?

Nothing in this world could replace this tender sound nor Pingting's one smile.

Chu Beijie roared in laughter for a long time. He was so happy that he was almost about to cry again, but he managed to control himself in the end. He softly exclaimed to Pingting, "This is one arrow of revenge is really quite harsh." His voice was full of desperation.

All sorts of the pain Pingting suffered were dissipated in that very moment. Seeing Chu Beijie's excitement, she felt rather guilty herself. She lowered her head and spoke as quietly as a mosquito, "How can Pingting mention it, if Duke isn't going to ask? But Pingting was quite stubborn about this so don't be angry, Duke. Pingting will accept any punishment, okay?"

Chu Beijie's piercing eyes studied her, as if using his eyes to hold her so that she could forever be hidden in the depths of his eyes.

Angry?

He had the feeling of déjà vu.

The wind in the campsite silently blew past, hurling them back to that Three-Swallow Cliff. That day, archers had been lying in ambush in all directions, ready to fire. He Xia had appeared from above them, looking romantic as they forced him to make the five-year truce.

That day, he had been on the horse while Pingting was in his arms.

That day, he had been angry, absolutely furious.

That day was the first time he tasted heartbreak, the first time he realised that he loved a woman, the first time he had stepped onto this road of a thousand twists.

Both love and hate, happiness and sadness, were densely interwoven together. He hadn't been able to distinguish the taste between them and gained unshaken

values from that.

No, he wasn't angry any more.

How could he be angry? He already had so much.

Chu Beijie hugged Changxiao with one arm, his hand vigorously rubbing Changxiao's cheeks. His other arm held Pingting and hoped that time would stop at this moment forever.

Pingting was held by his sturdy hand and raised her head to look at Chu Beijie dotingly hugging their cute son. In the past, this scene was one she could only dream about and it had become true. Her eyes felt a stinging warmth.

She bit her lip, staring at the beautiful scene for a moment. She softly asked, "Duke isn't angry anymore?"

"Is Duchess no longer angry?" Chu Beijie smiled wryly, "You cheated death once and cheated once again, so I have suffered enough as well. Please Duchess, have mercy, don't punish me anymore. The wrongdoings I have done before, please forgive me."

Pingting was too ashamed to look up, but sweet laughter played on her lips. She clutched tightly to Chu Beijie's hand, saying, "Duke, there are people standing around us."

"So what?" Chu Beijie's gaze swept around and couldn't help toss back his head and laughing again. "Let them know that the one thing they must never do is offend their most beloved woman."

Correct.

Women always had ways to punish their men.

They would only think about their beloved man, and likewise, they were only willing to suffer heartbreak for their beloved man.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 67

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch67

Qierou, Yun Chang. The city was still on the peaceful side. The peasants didn't know their little town had become the prey of the Duke of Zhen-Bei as they continued their daily lives.

The Governor's accumulation of anger was still growing.

None of his subordinates found it difficult to find that those two were creating trouble everywhere, deliberately trying to find fault with the Governor by mixing their foul stench into Qierou. Even mud had a temper and the Governor's ability to bear until now was still considered an amazing feat itself.

"They came back again?"

"Yes." His subordinates were rather uncomfortable, "After respectfully sending them away, they would return the next day."

The corners of Fanlu's twitched, his gaze flickering backwards.

Dujing hurriedly stepped forward, bending down to report, "The silver has been sent according to Sir's instructions."

Sigh, those two had far too much of an appetite.

Though it was to be expected, who told him to follow the wrong person, becoming one of Senior Official Gui's people? The Gui family had fallen now, and he always got a beating by the others. Otherwise, there was no way he'd be held down so miserably by these two officials.

Even his clerk's eyebrows drooped considerably. Quite a lot of the strands in his goatee had snapped too.

“Sir,” his subordinate suggested, “those two only refuse to go because they see that our Qierou has a bit of wealth. I heard last time they went to Xian Na City, the Xian Na Governor gave them two chicken-heart sized red rubies, and they left in glee. I reckon...”

Fanlu coldly harrumphed. “Chicken-heart sized red rubies? Where are we to find chicken-heart sized rubies for them? We’ve already given them quite a lot of money.”

Dujing stood beside Fanlu, hesitating.

Fanlu pulled a face, while the good natured subordinate backed away.

“Sir, it’s actually quite simple.” Dujing stepped forward, his eyes narrowed as he said, “Sir may not have precious gemstones, but Qierou has people. Although Qierou is a small city, there are still a few wealthy families, so there must be some ancestral treasures that can satisfy Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng.”

Fanlu’s expression changed, “You want me to extort peasants out of their family heirlooms?” He had been trained in the army as an expert spy so he could readily kill or set fires, but he had never once thought about extorting peasants.

Dujing wryly smiled, as he rubbed his hands. “It’s because Sir doesn’t agree, that’s why I never said it. But Sir, this Sir Pu Guang and Pu Sheng staying here isn’t a good plan either. What if you really do annoy them and they go back to the capital to rattle off to the Prince Consort. Sir will be in a lot of danger. They’re also on very good terms with the Prince Consort’s favourite, General Fei Zhaoxing.

Fanlu felt a sensation like he had just taken a whole mouthful of lard. He frowned, “Who would freely hand over their priceless ancestral heirlooms? I’m afraid we won’t be able to buy it either.”

Dujing frowned, his expression looking very upset. “We don’t mean to do evil; it’s really only to protect ourselves. You are a governor, holding all of the lives of the peasants in your hand. Isn’t it quite simple task to ask to borrow an item? I’m trying to think for Sir.”

Fanlu felt incredibly uncomfortable.

Being the governor of this rubbish city wasn’t cool at all. Ever since He Xia

gained all the power, each day got harder than the day before. He even went as far to think that it would've been better if he stayed in the army, happily being a lowly spy.

But as the various forces of Yun Chang clashed, every single Gui party's lives had been at stake, just the slightest mistake would attract a massive disaster. Who wouldn't know better than asking for trouble?

He wasn't exactly a sincere man. After thinking about it, he clenched his teeth and nodded. "Let's do that then. I just don't know which family treasure will satisfy them."

Seeing him nod, Dujing sighed in relief. He quickly answered, "No need for Sir to feel distressed over. I have already prepared a list." He took out a scrap of paper from his sleeves, opened it and started to read.

A cabinet officer hurried through the door, reporting, "Sir, those two generals have returned."

"Welcome them into the main room and serve them." Fanlu's eyebrows were tightly furrowed as he turned to Dujing, "Don't bother, just choose someone suitable and make sure they're gone as soon as possible. The food supply team should be arriving today, so I will go outside the city to deal with them. That's good though, I won't be able to see them as I really don't want to see or bow or pamper their disgusting faces." He took the light crossbow that never left his side off the table and slipped through the back hall. He left behind a smiling Dujing who actually had a headache. He then went to attend to those insatiable Sirs at the main entrance.

Zuiju was in the rear of the residence. Now that she could freely walk around the Governor Residence, her freedom increased considerably. But it had been a while since going out, so her boredom was quite justified. She paced around, plucking all sorts of herbs from the corners of the courtyard.

Seeds had been scattered not long ago, so only two or three tiny shoots popped out.

She had a natural innate love of plants. She carefully applied fertiliser to each one of them before stretching and standing up again.

The familiar cabinet officer came to report, “Miss Zuiju, Sir said that he is going outside the city and is afraid that he might not be able to make it back in time, so that you can eat yourself.”

Zuiju replied, “Ok”, rather unenthusiastically.

That Fanlu, when he was in front of her, she was dying for him to disappear as soon as possible, but when he wasn't, she felt a little gloomy.

“Just take the dinner to my room.”

Dinner was served; Zuiju sat alone facing the shadows casted by the candle. She jabbed a few dishes with her chopsticks, losing her appetite.

It seemed the food supply team had arrived again. It was really quite disquieting the way they come every so often.

Thinking of food supply for the army, she couldn't help think of her Teacher whose whereabouts were unknown, and Pingting whose soul was lonely. Zuiju felt even more upset, seeing her own lonely shadow being imprinted on the wall.

She put down her chopsticks, the corners of her eyes reddening.

With that hateful Fanlu around, although he always angered her until her teeth itched, she would never feel so sad like now.

Zuiju raised her sleeve to wipe away her tears when she suddenly heard laughter floating through the windows. There were both men and women and not long later, another girl giggled before singing a melody. Zuiju stood up, coming to the door and happened to see one of the passing maids. She waved at her, frowning, “Who's here again? They're so noisy.”

The maid answered, “Of course it's those two something Sirs. They're here again. Advisor Du has sent for a prostitute called Chun something who is currently accompanying him while he drinks.”

Zuiju knew those two sucked up to He Xia to gain his favour and created all sorts of trouble for Fanlu. She was quite disgusted by them as she eyed the bright lit room guest room. She thought that even if she returned into the room, the noise would be irritable so she simply stayed outside, heading towards the pavilion at the rear of the residence.

She arrived at the pavilion and the evening breeze greeted her, much more comfortable than expected. Zuiju's mood was a bit better. She sat in the pavilion, still puzzling over when Fanlu returned when she suddenly heard footsteps from behind. Her heart lifted and she blurted, "You evil man, finally back?" When she turned, her expression changed considerably.

The potbellied Pu Guang had drunk quite a lot in the guest room. Seeing how his younger brother Pu Sheng had pulled the prostitute Yingchun down, ready to go out it, he thought that he might as well pull the one called Guihua down the stairs and look for another room, pleasuring through the night.

But he had unexpectantly drank too much. After a few stops he dizzily stumbled down the stairs and Miss Guihua was already gone when he turned back. The sky had already darkened as he stumbled throughout the residence until finally stumbling by this little pavilion.

Then he suddenly heard a woman's clear and crisp voice. "You evil man, finally back?"

Pu Guang raised his head. The woman quietly sat there under the moon and her looks were really quite good. He instantly thought he'd struck lucky and began to pervertedly smile. "Baby, I'm coming. I'll pleasure you so much that you can die happy..." With all his drunkenness, he rushed forwards, touching those tender little hands, pressing forward with his ugly face.

Zuiju hadn't had her guard up. Only until he'd touched her did she scream, "Kyaa." She leapt up to her feet from the stone chair, reached out and shoved the fat Pu Guang onto the ground.

The places her hand touched felt disgusting. Zuiju had been with her Teacher since childhood and had always been treated with respect. Apart from the damn Fanlu, there hadn't been any other man who dared take liberties with her. Thinking that much didn't make her anger cool, she went closer and slapped him twice, making a "paah-paah" sound.

She was a woman and didn't slap people very often, so her slaps weren't that strong.

Pu Guang had suffered the two light slaps, but he didn't leave. He drunkenly stepped forward again. He smiled in glee, "Such fragrant hands, little beauty,

give it to me again. It's to both of our advantage, you give me your fragrant hands and I'll give you a meatstick to eat."

Zuiju had never heard such things so she was stunned, not knowing what he was talking about. She had yet to open her mouth when a sharp arrow broke the wind. The whoosh directly hit Pu Guang's chest.

The arrow came without warning, both rapid and accurate. Pu Guang's eyes bulged out for a moment like frogs, not making a single sound as his body fell towards the floor, below Zuiju's feet.

Zuiju was taken aback. She abruptly took a step back, her back crashing into what seemed like a person's arms. She looked back in dismay. When she saw his face properly, she immediately sighed in relief. "It's you..."

It was strange, but she felt relieved.

Fanlu's expression was extremely twisted. He stood there, staring, for a long time. One hand held his light crossbow, the other holding Zuiju's arms as he pulled her forward.

Zuiju was stumbled with his pulls. "What are you doing?"

Fanlu pulled her to Pu Guang's corpse. Although Zuiju was a doctor, she was still a girl and was afraid of the dead. She wanted to step back, not expecting that Fanlu would viciously tug her forwards, not letting her to move an inch back.

He loaded another arrow on his crossbow with one hand. He gave it to Zuiju, "Hold it."

Zuiju saw how scary his expression was and obediently took it.

Fanlu beckoned at Pu Guang's corpse with his chin. "Shoot him."

"He's already dead."

"Are you going to shoot or not?" Fanlu stared at her viciously, his eyes rather red.

In the moment Zuiju hesitated, Fanlu obstinately leaned over, grabbed her hand, and pulled the trigger.

Zuiju closed her eyes. The arrow had already flown with a whoosh until it deeply lodged itself in Pu Guang's throat.

He had only just died so his blood was still warm. His throat's blood splattered all over the ground.

Fanlu took the light crossbow from Zuiju's hands. He patted her cheek, wanting her to open her eyes. He said in a grave voice, "If someone dares say those words to you, shoot him with an arrow before he continues, understood?"

He was quite fierce and barbaric right now, not having his usually slovenly expression. Even Zuiju didn't dare argue, so she nodded. Her expression rather puzzled, "What did those words mean?"

Fanlu narrowed his eyes at her. She had no idea what he was thinking about. He revealed a strange expression, then enigmatically laughed, "It's not something particularly bad, but only I can say them to you, not others."

Although Zuiju didn't quite understand, she guessed that it definitely wasn't something good. She glared at him, "As a dog, you can only bark." Her blush was faint, but she lowered her head anyway.

Fanlu chuckled, turning around to go. Zuiju hurriedly stopped him, "Where are you going?" There was a terrifying looking corpse beside her, so there was no way she'd let herself be left alone there.

Fanlu shrugged, "He has another brother. One's gone, so the other has to accompany him to death too. Unless I let him off, so he can have revenge? You guard this corpse; it better not be gone."

He strode away, a few shadows flickering in the courtyard until he disappeared.

Zuiju froze on the spot. She turned to look back at Pu Guang's body in the moonlight. The little puddle beside him rippled with a strangle cold light. She couldn't help but feel chills run up her spine. Her hands hugged her body.

Fanlu had actually left for half an hour.

Zuiju looked at Pu Guang's body. She felt like she was being roasted on the fire. Whenever she heard movement, she would nervously retrieve her head until

it was hidden inside the pavilion, in fear of attracting people that would then notice Pu Guang's corpse.

Pu Guang was a missionary amongst the Yun Chang officials. It would be no trivial matter if his body were found in Qierou.

She craned her neck, fully wishing Fanlu would quickly return but that figure didn't appear. Anger towards Fanlu flipped over and over again in her stomach. She swore to herself that she would never forgive him when she saw him.

When a shadow flickered in her sight, her eyes lit up immediately.

Fanlu had the limp Pu Sheng over his shoulder as he breezily returned.

"You're finally back; that totally scared me to death." Zuiju's heart felt like it was flying. She didn't feel afraid any more, now that she'd seen Fanlu's face.

Fanlu looked at her, "Why are you still here?"

Zuiju stiffened, asking, "When you told me to guard the corpse and that it better not be gone?"

"What's cool to look about a corpse? He won't run away." Fanlu linked, laughing, "I was joking, but you took it seriously anyway?"

Zuiju almost fainted with anger. She grinded her teeth, "I wanted to help you, but you played me instead."

Fanlu assessed her from top to bottom. "Look at you. At most your help will backfire."

The earlier fierceness had gone, replaced by that unserious grin again. He kicked the Pu Guang on the ground while weighing the Pu Sheng on his shoulders. He frowned, "How heavy, that stomach of flesh, blood and fat. I guess I totally shouldn't've feed them all sorts of delicacies, if I had known that one arrow was enough to get rid of them." He turned to Zuiju, "I am going to hide them one by one, so obediently wait for me here."

Zuiju nodded, and watched Fanlu disappear with Pu Sheng in the distance before abruptly coming back to her senses. She was furious, "Dammit, who is going to obediently wait for you?" She stomped several times and stormed back to her room, not caring about the body on the ground any more.

Her heart only fumed, no longer as jumpy and afraid as before.

She sat inside her room for a long time, not feeling sleepy as she stared outside the door. By midnight, Fanlu came in as expected. He swaggered inside, swaggered to a seat, picked up a tea jug on the table, and poured it in his mouth. He mumbled to himself, "The corpse had to be hid and the blood on the ground had to be wiped off, busying me all night. Sigh, those two guys are heavier than pigs. It really wasn't easy taking their corpses to the hiding place. Did so much walking, my shoulders are so painful they can barely lift my hands." The more he said, the more pitiful he seemed.

Although Zuiju was pretty angry, she knew this was all for her. She felt a little sorry. She could only stand up and walk to his side. In a rather awkward tone, she asked, "Where does it hurt?"

"Shoulders."

Zuiju softly massaged for him. Massaging was one of the things she learned from her teacher. Her technique was well-grounded, but her strength was a little weak.

Fanlu didn't care whether her strength was strong or weak, being massaged like this was a rare blessing itself. He narrowed his eyes as he merrily teased, "Feels very nice. This shoulder must have gotten good karma in its previous lives to have such beautiful hands massage them."

Zuiju glared at him, "I know, your next few words won't be any good. If you dare say another, I won't massage for you anymore."

Fanlu sighed, but he really did obediently close his mouth.

After a while, Zuiju asked, "Now that they're dead, how will you explain to the people above?"

Fanlu didn't answer.

Zuiju said, "You can speak. I'll massage for you as long as you don't say anything mean."

Fanlu finally answered, "They didn't die, but they received enough jewels and gold so they left satisfied."

“Why’s that?”

“Organising false illusions are my forte. Who else can clear up two fatty pigs in just half a night?”

He was indeed an expert in organising false illusions, as he was the one who tricked the world of Bai Pingting’s death.

Zuiju remembered how he had gone to kill Pu Sheng, actually using up half an hour, probably because he had formed a scenario by then. She didn’t ask for any more.

The two people chatted in the room, gossiped a bit until both felt a little sleepy.

Zuiju studied him, “Don’t you have paperwork tomorrow? Why don’t you go sleep?”

Fanlu yawned, “Why sleep? The sky will brighten in an hour. You saw a dead man, so undoubtedly spending the night alone would be scary. I’ll accompany you until the sky brightens and you can sleep when morning comes. There’ll be light everywhere, so you won’t be afraid.”

Zuiju listened to his words, her heart immediately softening. Her voice had lightened too, “I’m not afraid. You’ve been busy all night, so boiling through the rest of your energy isn’t good. Go to sleep soon.”

Fanlu sighed again, “To be honest, when I kill a man, I’ll have nightmares for the next few days. I won’t be able to sleep at all anyway.”

Zuiju frowned as she said, “I’ll give you a prescription for sleep, okay?”

“I have such prescriptions too that will definitely work. It’s just that the component was hard to find.”

Zuiju was curious. “What rare herbs? I’ll help you think of where to find them.”

“If genius Doctor Zuiju would let me hug her to sleep then...” His words had yet to fall when his shoulder had been thumped by Zuiju’s fist. Fanlu helplessly said, “I said that the component was hard to find.”

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 68

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch68

The tails of dreams were hard to catch; Chu Beijie was unable to sleep.

But Changxiao was buried in his arms, long fallen asleep obediently. His soft little body but rather heavy breathed evenly as he stuck his hot little face against Chu Beijie's shoulder.

"Can I really put him down?" Chu Beijie had maintained the same position for a long time. He lowered his voice as much as he could, worrying as he asked.

"Yes."

"Wouldn't it wake him up?"

"No. He's already deep in sleep."

Chu Beijie studied the son in his arms and frowned, "I reckon he'll wake up."

Pingting was both amused and angry. She walked over and skilfully took their son from his arms, wrapping him in a blanket. Chu Beijie took just one step towards the blanket. He lowered his head, studying every detail carefully, his eyes flashing in the candlelight, never leaving his son.

"Be lighter." Chu Beijie nervously watched, "Be careful not to wake him or he'll cry."

Pingting laughed for a long time. She straightened up and looked at Chu Beijie, unable to straighten her mouth, breaking into a soft chuckle. "They all say fathers are strict while mothers are gentle, but it's the opposite."

Chu Beijie knew he was being too nervous. He grabbed her slender body, pulling her closer to him. He clenched his teeth, "Who's the one hurting the

other now?" He didn't wait for an explanation before nibbling lightly on Pingting's delicate earlobe.

"Ow..." Pingting gently yelped, her ear stinging a little, bringing with it a warm and damp feeling.

It seemed that after Chu Beijie nibbled, his tongue immediately followed. Pingting instantly flushed bright red and reached out a hand to push his chest. She shyly said, "What is Duke doing?"

"I am thinking how I can fight without soldiers." Chu Beijie chuckled softly, spraying hot air into Pingting's ear. "Does Duchess give up?"

"Using teeth to bite people isn't elegant..."

There was no way his metal-like broad shoulders could be so easily pushed away by Pingting. After having enough of dawdling, he grabbed onto Pingting, quietly heading outside. The two people went outside the tent where the bright stars in the sky suddenly appeared before their eyes.

Chu Beijie sighed, "This kind of atmosphere needs qin sound to go with it." He turned and looked at Pingting.

Pingting said, "Where can you find a qin in such wilderness?"

Chu Beijie laughed without a reply. His deep eyes watched her, her blush spreading ear to ear. Under his gaze perhaps no one could remain calm under, Pingting began to smile instead. She shifted her position in Chu Beijie's grasp, leading him past the quiet barracks and finding a quiet forest to sit down.

"Since there's no qin, why don't Duke allow Pingting to sing a song?"

"What song?" asked Chu Beijie.

Pingting revealed a grin, "A song of rebellion to apologise to Duke?"

"Oh?" Chu Beijie quietly thought for a moment. He softened his voice, "Why does Pingting need to apologise to me?"

For some reason, Pingting was actually startled by this question. She lowered her thick eyelashes, thinking for a long time. She slowly replied, "Probably because of Pingting's guilt due to her stubbornness that caused so many hardships to Duke."

Her head was lowered and Chu Beijie felt a wave of pity. He held her in his arms, murmuring, "As long as you and Changxiao are both by my side, countless hardships will be nothing to me."

This wasn't exactly the first time he'd held Pingting like this since their reunion. But the this moment's feeling was much more soothing the days before. The scene where Chu Beijie held Changxiao in his arms had already been engraved into her heart.

She couldn't help tightly hold onto Chu Beijie, letting her head be muffled in his broad chest. In a low voice, she asked, "Does Duke regret meeting Pingting?"

Chu Beijie didn't answer. He just reached out to softly lift her chin, planting a warm kiss on her beautiful red lips.

The stars twinkled while oblique shadows were pulled out from the forest behind, guarding this deeply affectionate couple.

"Allow me to sing you a song tonight." Chu Beijie finally loosened his grip around Pingting and faintly smiled, pondering carefully. He then actually began to sing.

"If spring love only, autumn nostalgia serves; if autumn nostalgia only, bitter parting serves; never betray..."

His voice was deep and rich, seeped with many emotions. Each word jumped out of his throat like jade beads, brightening the forest.

"Never betray..."

His clear voice rang in the night, the silent forests, wind, and darkness, applauding in their own way.

No qin.

But Chu Beijie's deep voice didn't need to be accompanied by qin.

He put his heart into singing, particularly the words "Never Betray". His words seemed to dance back the Jing-An Ducal Residence, the confrontation at the Battle of Kanbu, and the other numerous times they stumbled together on the way. All of their pain and memories flipped out, following the wind.

The injuries lifted, going back to where they came from.

The sound wandered through the forest, just how it embedded itself in every memory. Pingting listened, captivated. Tears began to fall from her eyes, falling straight onto the stretch of grass and causing a momentary flower-like splash, when the singing stopped.

The forest was very quiet, letting Pingting listen to every long breath of Chu Beijie. Perhaps, every heartbeat too.

Pingting lifted her sleeves, quietly wiping the corners of her eyes without changing her expression. "What does Duke understand?"

Chu Beijie dotingly enveloped her in his embrace. He whispered, "I understand that you have never changed your mind despite the hundreds and thousands of twists."

"Never changed my mind despite the hundreds and thousands of twists..." Pingting contemplated the words.

"Clever Bai Pingting, stupid Bai Pingting, kind Bai Pingting, and the evil Bai Pingting, are all the Bai Pingting I love." Chu Beijie breathed out before asking his own question, "Why would I regret it?"

Pingting's eyes held tears in them. She looked up slowly, watching the clear light in his eyes, firm with decision.

The shattering sound came out from nowhere, gradually becoming smoke that hid in the clouds, only leaving its faint echo in the heart.

Let all sorrow and buried hatred vanish like smoke into the clouds.

The pain that even alcohol could not drown the two's desires no longer mattered.

When she was pregnant, she cried while spilling the mixture all over the cold ground, just like the despair that overpowered her world.

Behind her, he had chased thousands of miles with his soldiers, filling the sky with the fire of murder.

They once sworn to the moon to overcome everything. They had to overcome so many incidents in the past, so many tests.

Her gaze shifted towards the sky. She suddenly exclaimed with joy, "The

moon's out."

"Where?"

Her slender fingers that were almost as thin as spring onion leapt towards the sky. "Over there, can Duke see it?"

Chu Beijie didn't turn his head, just stared at her, as if wanting to drown her in those inky depths. After a few moments, his handsome face revealed a faint smile, "I see, it's over there."

He lowered his head, softly kissing those trembling eyelashes.

The two spent the whole night saying nothing but nonsense, yet neither felt a trace of weariness. At early morning, the sky slowly brightened, its rays spreading bit by bit through the forest, lifting the fog. They then finally returned to the tent, seeing that Changxiao had already woken a while ago. He didn't cry nor make trouble but examined the tassels on the edge of the blanket as he couldn't pull them off.

"You're already being naughty right after opening your eyes." Pingting went to hug him up, but Changxiao was still far too interested in those tassels, his tiny hand refusing to let go so that a corner of the blanket was lifted with him.

Chu Beijie only boasted, "Good boy, he shares my toughness."

Changxiao turned to see him coming closer and yelped with excitement. He didn't care about the tassels anymore so he released his hold, causing the blanket to fall onto the ground. Changxiao only bothered to reach out to Chu Beijie with his two little hands.

Chu Beijie was even more delighted. "Look, he really likes me." His hand reached out to hug Changxiao.

Pingting laughed "What like? He's only interested in your Divine Spirit sword."

As expected, once Changxiao entered Chu Beijie's arms, he wholeheartedly tries to get the hilt at Chu Beijie's waist. The Divine Spirit sword wasn't light. He was small and in Chu Beijie's arms, so there was no way he could grope for the belt no matter how he twisted. He yelled in dissatisfaction, "Knife-knife!"

"Good son. If you like it, Father will give it to you."

“Are there fathers like you? He’s still young; such an obvious weapon is not a good choice to give.”

The family of three were having their fun, when Moran lifted the flap and entered. His voice was quite refreshed as he reported, “The few people that Duke recently sent private letters ago have already arrived.”

“They should be coming over the next few days.” Chu Beijie then asked, “How many have arrived?”

“More than twenty.”

“Eight or nine was expected as this time, but to reach that many by letter is already amazing.” Chu Beijie held on the endlessly wriggling Changxiao, saying to Pingting, “Let’s go see them together. These were all my former subordinates and retired for all sorts of reasons. Every one of them has a forte of their own.”

Pingting said, “It’s said that all people with skills are living in seclusion now. To be summoned by Duke’s letter at the final moment must mean that they are all very talented.” She took over Changxiao, putting him on the ground. She then patted his round head, “Be good, Changxiao. Go find Ze Qing to play.”

Changxiao was happy as he skipped away from the tent.

Chu Beijie was a little worried though. “How will he know where Ze Qing is? This place is a mess.”

“Yangfeng’s tent is right next door. Don’t worry, he’ll definitely find it.”

The remaining three had even more important matters to attend to. They couldn’t always think about the children. They immediately went to see the latest arrivals. They really were the talent amongst soldiers. Some of them were very good at setting up devices in the mountains and forests while others specialised in ambush or assassination.

When Chu Beijie led these soldiers, he highly valued these people. The summoned not only hate those who specialised in fighting on the frontlines but also those who specialised in healing cuts from swords.

“Although genius Doctor Huo’s medical skills are excellent, he tends to noble families so his treatment is detailed and thorough. There are lots of casualties in

war so time is urgent, and the most important thing is speed. When it comes to speed, only the doctors who specialise in military treatment is the best.”

Under Chu Beijie’s introductions, Pingting met each one of them before hurried into the military conference.

Once entering the tent, they realised all of the generals had arrived, appearing to be waiting for them.

Chu Beijie was full of joy, having held his son in the morning and Pingting at hand. His face was like the spring breeze. He smiled quite refreshingly when entering, “Bei Mo’s new soldiers arrived yesterday. On Dong Lin’s side, my former subordinates have arrived this morning. With just another two or three days of preparation, we can follow our previously thought up strategy and sneak into Yun Chang, taking the initiative. What do you all think?” The others’ expressions weren’t as good as Chu Beijie, causing the smile on his face to freeze. “What’s wrong?”

There was a moment of silence in the tent before Ruohan said, “Please look at this latest report, Duke.” He took out the report and handed it to Chu Beijie.

One of the rules in the army said stated a report with urgent content must to be written with vermillion for the receiving generals to be able to immediately glance and understand the important message.

Chu Beijie took and opened it. The first line that jumped into his sight was a line written in vermillion—The Royal House of Gui Le was killed by He Xia...”

Pingting was standing beside Chu Beijie. Her thick eyelashes jumped, and her expression immediately changed when glimpsing the line of vermillion words.

The entire Royal House of Gui Le?

That didn’t mean just He Su but also the Queen and their underaged son.

The one who held the sword was He Xia, the descendant of the House of Jing-An, the House of Jing-An that loyally protected the Gui Le Royal House for centuries.

It was her Master...

The words in the army report began to quiver. Pingting could barely breathe.

She suddenly felt a warmth on her shoulder as Chu Beijie steadied her.

Everyone there knew Gui Le was still her home country. Even though the King of Gui Le wasn't kind to her, they still grew up together, so her sorrow couldn't be helped.

Chu Beijie helped her to a chair, wanting her to sit down. He softly asked, "Are you okay?"

The Queen of Dong Lin walked over, "This place is too stuffy with all the hurt. I'll accompany you with a walk outside and see where Changxiao has gone."

Pingting calmed down, looking at her surroundings in the tent. She saw everyone's face had a faint trace of concern, but this made her calm down instead. She slowly said, "I'm fine; sitting is good. The military affairs are urgent, so you mustn't delay."

Chu Beijie answered before continuing to read the rest of the report. The rest was quite eloquent; more than a hundred words to describe the detailed information the spies found. He then placed the report on the table, lightly asking, "What do Generals think?"

Luoshang spoke everyone's biggest concern. "Gui Le has already fallen. Le Zhen has been completely annihilated by Fei Zhaoxing. Now, the final power of the four countries that could possibly oppose He Xia has been eradicated."

"Next, He Xia would put full strength into attacking us." Ruohan's voice was heavy.

It was impossible not to feel heavy.

Once the Gui Le army was defeated, the four countries had already fallen into He Xia's hands.

Against the He Xia who obtained the strength of all four countries, this mere little Ting Army could pretty much be described as wasteful effort.

The generals in the tent were all lead commanders of their armies. They were able to face enemies alone, skilled in analysing the opposing situation. They didn't actually want to agree, but no matter how they analysed the situation, ninety to eighty percent of everything was favourable towards He Xia.

Their enemy was just too strong.

Chu Beijie's fingers tapped on the table while he quietly listened.

A little while later, all had been said. The crowd stopped, and silence instantly filled the room except for an messy rhythmed tapping sound on the table.

Tap, tap, tap, tap...

Everyone stared at Chu Beijie's figure which looked as steady as a rock. It seemed that nothing in the world could make that broad back bend. They silently waited. The more the silence increased, the sense of steadiness increased too. Coupled with a never to be defeated attitude, there was a hidden rhythm that spread inside the tent.

The generals couldn't help close their mouths tightly. They knew Chu Beijie was thinking.

Tap.

The tapping sound against the table suddenly stopped.

For some reason, everyone's thumping heart also managed to relax.

Chu Beijie turned. The group guessed he was about to say something about his plan and waited in anticipation. They didn't expect him to have his gaze fixed on Pingting. He asked, "Will He Xia immediately leave Gui Le and put full effort into eradicating us?"

This question was beyond everyone's expectations.

Suddenly all gazes swivelled towards the sitting Pingting.

Pingting quietly sat for a few moments, a little colour had returned to her face. She gracefully stood up, glancing at the opened army report on the table, the vermillion words jumping right out. It felt like her heart had been pricked by a thin needle. She slightly frowned, whispering, "No."

This was different to everyone else's guess.

There was a seriousness to cheer tone, and no one doubted that she was saying nonsense. After everyone had exchanged gazes, the Queen of Dong Lin opened her mouth to ask, "How does Pingting know?"

A rough hand reached out, tightly holding Pingting's hand. Pingting raised her head, giving Chu Beijie a profound look. She turned towards the Queen of Dong Lin, "Does Queen know why He Xia is using such unscrupulous methods obtain the world?"

"For power and fame."

Pingting tightly pursed her lips, revealing a wry smile. "For the House of Jing-An."

The House of Jing-An.

Their Residence of Jing-An could please others, from their songs all night to their cold breezes.

The ponds had been quiet, greeting the wind. The bright but not extravagant Residence of Jing-An had gone up in flames overnight.

"Now that the Gui Le army has been annihilated, there will never be anyone else with the power to threaten He Xia's authority." Pingting continued, "Now that he single-handedly ruined the four countries, what else does he wish for? The House of Jing-An will once again raise He Xia's lofty ambitions so he will definitely try to quickly raise the House of Jing-An to an unimaginable height of glory."

"Miss means...He Xia will leave Gui Le and rebuild the House of Jing-An?" Moran frowned as he thought. "But the Marquess' personality wouldn't do something so time-consuming when he knows that he is still in threat from the Duke."

Chu Beijie revealed a pleased smile, "Moran, listen properly. Did Pingting not say the four words, 'unimaginable height of glory'?"

"I understand!" The light of understanding lit up in Luoshang's mind. He began to yelp, "He Xia wants to immediately ascend the throne! He wants to establish a new country and become King so the House of Jing-An can be raised to the unimaginable height of glory."

Ruohan also thumped against the armrest, exclaiming, "Once hierarchies are set, He Xia would officially control the world, making the rebellious parties of peasants much weaker."

“And then he’ll put that brain of his to use, making gentle policies that will calm everyone down...”

“And finally, he would take his time and get rid of us.”

“It’ll be even easier to get rid of us by then.”

Although they started off thinking the situation was urgent, this line of thinking hadn’t changed anything at all. No matter how they looked at it, it seemed that they were trapped like a turtle in an urn.

Everyone’s expressions darkened once more.

Moran thought for a moment. He then looked at Chu Beijie. “So, please Duke, decided what to do next.”

Chu Beijie smiled slightly. Pingting saw he was about to speak. She shook her head, “No more testing me. The main advisor is Duke.”

Chu Beijie was afraid she was upset over the army report and wanted to tease her a bit so she could more or less forget it. But after hearing her words, he couldn’t make her take the glory again so he lowered his voice, “Duchess wants to see her husband make the instructions? I’ll obey that then.” His gaze shifted, scanning each of the audience in the tent.

Everyone knew he was about to decide on the plan. They paid closer attention, holding their breaths to listen quietly.

“The Gui Le army fell too quickly, leaving us very little time. No need to do intense preparation any more, Moran and I will lead one thousand of the best soldiers to sneak into Yun Chang, capturing Qierou.”

Luoshang accompanied Chu Beijie for many years and naturally thought he would be amongst the ones to sneak into Qierou, but he hadn’t heard his name. His expression suddenly changed. He almost jumped right out of his chair, “Duke, I..”

“Don’t worry, you have another task.”

Luoshang managed to settle and sat back down.

“It isn’t easy to establish a new country, so He Xia will definitely find a feng shui consultant to carefully choose an auspicious day, so the event will be

peacefully accepted by all. He will pick an auspicious day, so we will help him create some unluckiness to lower his morale.” Chu Beijie then picked, “Ruohan, Luoshang, Hua Can, and twenty or so veterans who arrived today were all my former subordinates, each skilled in their own way. Take a few of them each, as well as a few capable soldiers from the various regiments, forming little squads that will each enter different places.

Ruohan managed to understand better than most, asking, “You want us to create unlucky incidents everywhere, to create panic amongst the peasants, right?”

Chu Beijie nodded, asking, “These are all the skill of lying, different from the battlefield. Since there are Yun Chang soldiers everywhere nowadays, be careful, Ruohan. Hiding your traces is the most important; don’t let others find you. It’s up to you in how you would create the unlucky incidents, but can you do it?”

Ruohan hadn’t replied yet when a voice cut through.

“Mud oozing blood, swallows dropping dead for no reason, statues crying... that kind of thing right?”

Chu Beijie’s glaze flickered, realising that it was Hua Can. He smiled at him, “I hadn’t expected General Hua to be such an expert. Correct, things like that.”

“These things aren’t difficult to do at all.” Hua Can frowned, “But even if we use a lot of effort to unsettle the peasants, these things are irrelevant to He Xia with his hundreds of thousands of soldiers. It just isn’t practical.”

Of course playing around as havoc-causing ghosts wasn’t as stimulating as going to Qierou. Luoshang was also grouching over it too. But hearing the discontent Hua Can had towards Chu Beijie, Luoshang immediately retorted, “How does General Hua know that it isn’t practical at all? You ought to know when attacking the enemy, attacking the heart is most important...”

Chu Beijie raised a hand, preventing Luoshang from continuing to speak. He turned to Hua Can, “You’ll understand what use it is in the future.” He didn’t expand further on the question, just continued to assign everyone, “The rest of the people will stay in the main camp with Sister-in-Law in charge. You are to hide deep in the mountains, patiently waiting for news.” He turned to the Queen of Dong Lin, showing a sign of submission. He lowered his voice, “I’ll leave the

rest to you, Sister-in-Law. If the enemy does get closer, make sure to hide. Don't try to forcefully take them on."

Ever since the Queen of Dong Lin took charge of Dong Lin's royal authority, she encountered several dangerous moments, so many that she wasn't the woman who only knew how to hide deep in the Royal Residence long ago. She didn't decline after listening to Chu Beijie's words. She slowly nodded, "Don't worry, I definitely won't try to be brave and solve everything the steadiest way possible. I'll look after this place, waiting for all of you to return."

"Then I can be rest assured."

Chu Beijie had managed to lay out a three-way plan in just a few direct addresses. It seemed the current strategy was set. Everyone there were people who fought in wars and were quite tired of this place, so they were dying to do something soon. Moran stood up, saying, "As we're going to Qierou, I'll go make some preparations. As for the people to take, I will go pick one thousand five hundred elite soldiers, and Duke can pick one thousand from them. Does that sound good?"

Chu Beijie said, "No need for that much work. I believe in your taste. You can pick all of the people that come with us. Order them to immediately put on some lightweight clothes and prepare to hit the road."

Luoshang also stood up. He stretched, loosening his tense muscles as he said, "Our side will split into three squads, but we will still need to carefully discuss about which countries to infiltrate and what action to take. General Ruohan, General Huacan, come, let us find a place to discuss."

The generals quickly left. The Queen of Dong Lin then stood too, "With the Duke of Zhen-Bei's instructions to look after the camp, I will now go inspect it." She took two steps, suddenly stopping. She turned to ask Pingting, "About that child Zuiju, I remember she got into an incident in Yun Chang, correct?"

Pingting hadn't been ready for her sudden question about Zuiju. Her heart stung a little as she softly replied, "The Songsen Mountains on the border of Yun Chang and Bei Mo..."

"Hm..." The Queen of Dong Lin nodded. She then wondered aloud, "About the Duke of Zhen-Bei's trip to Qierou, see if you can bring along genius Doctor Huo."

He keeps on wanting to go to Yun Chang, but since I was worried about him, I used my illness as an excuse several times to discourage him. But looking at him, he will go sooner or later. I'm a bit more reassured if he's with you."

Chu Beijie and Pingting exchanged a look.

This trip of Chu Beijie to Qierou was an infiltration in enemy territory. It was really much more dangerous than Huo Yunan trying to find Zuiju alone. There was no way Pingting could let him get hurt as he was Zuiju's Teacher.

Pingting said, "Zuiju's body isn't actually in Yun Chang. While I was living in seclusion, I buried her inside Bei Mo territory."

"You mustn't let him see Zuiju's body. He won't take it, being an old man." The Queen of Dong Lin sighed, "Sigh, you're still young so you won't understand. Old people aren't able to take such a shock. If he sees a grave, it'll be disastrous. I just want you to take him around a bit and let the past fade for him a bit." As she said these words, she couldn't help think of her dead sons. The corners of her eyes began to redden, but she held it, refusing to cry.

Chu Beijie couldn't refuse after that. He answered, "Rest assured, Sister-in-Law. If genius Doctor Huo is coming, then I will properly look after him on the way.

He then sent the Queen off. After returning to the tent, he realised Pingting was still standing in the same place. Even though he'd seen fresh blood dripping and was a general who killed numerous enemies, he was terribly afraid of seeing his own woman upset.

Pingting returned to his side after two years. Chu Beijie always felt like she was a glass doll that could shatter at any time, and as long as her face showed depression, he just wouldn't stop worrying. He softly made his way beside Pingting, softening his voice, "What are you thinking? Why don't you go find Changxiao?"

Pingting knew he was afraid she was upset about Zuiju. She raised her head to look at him, revealing a shallow smile. "The arrangements Duke made today were all based on He Xia immediately ascending to the throne after establishing a new country. What if Pingting was wrong and He Xia didn't focus all his power on establishing a new country but immediately send troops to Dong Lin to attack

us instead, causing disaster?”

“How can Pingting guess wrong? You know He Xia the best.”

Pingting softly sighed in relief.

Chu Beijie asked, “What’s wrong? Pingting isn’t confident enough about herself? But I completely believe you.”

“I thought I knew him best too. If I didn’t get one hundred percent correct about what he was going to do, I would get at least seventy or eighty percent.” Pingting’s gaze drifted, stopping on that army report. She sighed, “But I had never guessed he would kill not only He Su but He Su’s Queen and underage son. There isn’t much I can say, even though Prince He Su grew up with us too. Hatred had been created by the House of Jing-An’s destruction after all. But the Prince is only a few years old. When he was born, we were all invited to celebrate with alcohol. Master had given him a jade bracelet, using gold thread to hang it around his neck...”

Chu Beijie didn’t wait for her to finish, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her eyelid over and over again, murmuring, “Don’t say any more, you’ll get really upset if you do. If you’re upset, I’m upset too. Do you not want me to sleep, even though I’m going to depart for Qierou soon?”

Pingting’s cheeks flushed red from his kisses. She squirmed away, “I won’t be able to sleep either with all your annoyances every day. Hm, if we’re both going, should we bring Changxiao?”

Chu Beijie seemed to be dazed for a moment. “You’re going too?”

“I’m not?”

Chu Beijie said, “It’s too dangerous; don’t come.” His eyebrows furrowed, his handsome features revealing quite a lot more gloom.

Pingting wasn’t scared of his expression at all, leaning against his shoulders instead. She asked, “Duke doesn’t want to let Pingting stay by his side?”

These words gently moved Chu Beijie. Quite a lot of people tried to suck up to him like this, but it just seemed that he was utterly defenceless against this one Pingting. His eyebrows knotted, his voice no longer as loud as before, “Of course

not.”

“Does Duke not worry that if he leaves Pingting here, his wife will be gone when he returns? The world is so vast, Pingting really wants to bring along Changxiao to travel to every place at least once.”

Chu Beijie grabbed onto her, his hands digging into her armpit. “Outrageous, how dare you threaten me again. It actually became a habit too.”

Pingting chortled, ducking beneath Chu Beijie’s hands, trying to escape. “I don’t dare, don’t dare to. If Duke wants Pingting to stay, Pingting will just obey.”

Chu Beijie hadn’t expected she would be so open. He pulled her towards him, carefully tidying the tousled hair on her forehead. “I’m going to go so let’s go see Changxiao.”

“He’s definitely playing with Ze Qing.”

The two went to see Changxiao. As expected, beside Yangfeng, he was happily playing with Ze Qing. Seeing Chu Beijie, both came forward to pull the Divine Spirit sword from his waist. Thinking how he was going to leave his son, he held up Changxiao, kissing and pinching him. After a long time, he reluctantly settled his wriggling son down who wanted to go play. There was no way Changxiao knew his father’s thoughts, and once he was on the ground, he giggled and ran off to play with Ze Qing again.

After an hour, Moran finished preparing everything. He came forwards to report, “The men have been chosen, just waiting for Duke’s command.”

Chu Beijie nodded, considering his options for a few moments. He said to Moran, “Pick a young good horse too, for Pingting.”

Moran answered, immediately going off to arrange it.

Pingting waited until Moran left before smiling as she looked at Chu Beijie. “Hadn’t you already subdued your enemy already? You subdued me into agreeing not to go already, so why go choose a horse? You really were afraid of me taking Changxiao away.”

Chu Beijie was so annoyed he clenched his teeth. He grabbed her hand, pulling her into his arms. “You’re not to go anywhere. I’ll lock you up myself.”

He had been teased by her to the pits of desperation in the past two years. He thought again and again, deciding to take Pingting with him in the end. Although it was a bit dangerous, he would at least be able to protect her if anything happened.

He crazily searched for her in the Songsen Mountains, breaching four of Yun Chang's checkpoints one after the other. That would be called torture.

"What about Changxiao?"

Chu Beijie bitterly endured and almost lost himself to his father's heart. A while passed before he clenched his teeth, "For now, leave him to Yangfeng. As long as I keep a close eye on the mother, I won't have to fear about losing my son."

Although Pingting wasn't willing to leave Changxiao to Yangfeng, she was assured. She nodded in agreement, stretched out, and promptly fell into Chu Beijie's arms, not moving at all.

Chu Beijie hadn't been able to do anything about her from the start, but when he looked down, seeing this precious treasure so gently elegant, he thought taking Pingting along was a good thing. He lowered his head to study her black hair and was just about to pull down a hairpin, having a few moments of that gentleness, when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. He forced himself to abruptly stop his hand.

Someone lifted the flap and entered, Moran again. He reported to Chu Beijie, "Miss Bai's horse has been chosen."

Pingting had already opened her eyes before Moran entered. She struggled out of Chu Beijie's arms, quickly fixing up her appearance at one side.

"To avoid the Yun Chang army noticing anything strange, it's best to move at night. Pass along this Order, cook dinner early tonight and set off after eating."

In the gatherings of dust, an inconspicuous-looking team set off from the forest.

They went through the mountains, heading straight towards Qierou.

The modest little town of Yun Chang quietly stood in its place. It seemed to

have no clue that the change of the world was just beginning.

When the first hooves sounds of Chu Beijie's and his beloved wife's sounded the expedition, everything had been decided—in the glorious opening chapter of the Ting courts, the name Qierou would forever be remembered.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 69

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch69

Bathed in brilliant morning light, Fei Zhaoxing lead the triumphant troops on their march on a flat road. In the distance, they could see the gates to the capital of Gui Le.

The remnants of the Gui Le army had been fully wiped out. In the two boxes close to his reach, they respectively held the heads of Le Di and Le Zhen.

The father and son were once his masters. He followed, risked his life, and sweated for them until they finally tried to do him in like stewing the hounds after all the hares were killed or the setting aside the bow when all the birds were shot.

Unsatisfied! He was unsatisfied!

This dissatisfaction caused him to choose betrayal without further thoughts, and the very same betrayal gave him achievements.

Wuu...wuu... The ancient horn blew out another long, deep sound, welcoming their arrival.

The gates were opened. Fei Zhaoxing surged into the Gui Le capital with his soldiers, amongst the calls of the horn.

Gui Le no longer existed. He Su died, the Royal House destroyed.

On the sides of the pathway were peasants kneeling down in greeting. These people of a fallen country were obviously forced out of their homes to hurry over by the soldiers. They trembled as they knelt, their gazes perhaps both angry and afraid. They tried to hide, trying not to let their piercing expressions rest on the soldiers.

These gazes couldn't be called good, but they did nothing to weaken Fei Zhaoxing's excitement and pride.

He didn't need to care. These peasants were humbly kneeling. They knew He Su was an incompetent coward. They didn't know as royalty, one must be decisive, heartless and vicious.

And who was better than He Xia, the romantic Marquess of Jing-An with great swordsmanship and looks?

The bystanders understood.

Fei Zhaoxing knew better than He Xia. Yaotian was a difficult checkpoint for He Xia.

When Yaotian took her last breath in the Yun Chang Royal Residence, nothing could bound He Xia, nonstop.

This made Fei Zhaoxing very happy. Life was a gamble to him. It was necessary to have insight to win. Fei Zhaoxing was wrong to follow Le Zhen, but this time he finally managed to beat on the right treasure.

He picked He Xia and obtained a golden opportunity.

After trotting past the kneeling peasants of the fallen country, the more he went inside, the more he realised how deserted the streets were. Occasionally he would see unsettled expressions, but under the cold glint of the Yun Chang soldiers in the sunlight, all of their expressions seemed to become statue-like indifference.

One of He Xia's trusted guards was waiting on the road. He was high-spirited as he spoke to Fei Zhaoxing who was about to head for the Royal Residence, "The Marquess of Jing-An isn't at the Royal Residence. General Fei, please go to the Jing-An Ducal Residence."

Fei Zhaoxing nodded, gathered his reins, and turned. The Jing-An Ducal Residence was He Xia's previous home so waiting there was very normal too.

He dismounted at the Jing-An Ducal Residence. The scene he saw was devastating. He was stunned for a moment before following the guard and stepping across the tall threshold.

The Residence had green moss everywhere and overgrown grass.

Across the carved columns charred by fire in the distance, He Xia was standing alone in this patch of barren solitude.

This lonely figure was about to have every river and mountain for eternities, and his name would be forever remembered.

Fei Zhaoxing didn't dare drop his guard. He walked over and stood there, respectfully saying, "Report to Marquess of Jing-An, I have already brought Le Di and Le Zhen's heads."

He Xia knew he arrived a while ago. He turned and assessed him with a glance, smiling, "Good job. You've done well and I have already prepared your reward. Come, read it."

A bodyguard came forward, opened up a scroll, and began to read aloud. The rewards were, as expected, abundant. Fei Zhaoxing used to follow Le Zhen hence he visited the Gui Le Royal Residence quite often even from his early years. The rewards included several prized treasures that even the King of Gui Le couldn't bear to give away.

He Xia picked the main seat. His expression was faint. It seemed as if he was smiling, but the laughter in his eyes wasn't very strong, so it was difficult to determine. Fei Zhaoxing waited until the guard finished reading and bowed to thank for his rewards. "I have only fought a shameless battle thanks to Marquess of Jing-An's blessings. I don't dare accept so many rewards." He then carefully asked, "Marquess of Jing-An has not yet seen Le Di and Le Zhen's head, perhaps..."

"No need." He Xia shook his head, "Why won't I trust you?"

Two glamorous maids brought forth hot tea, serving He Xia and Fei Zhaoxing. Fei Zhaoxing thanked He Xia and took the cup with both hands. The cup shone brilliantly. It was easy to tell it was a rare treasure. In this deserted Ducal Residence, it looked very out of place.

He Xia seemed to see what he was thinking. He took a sip of the hot tea, "I once instructed this place to be decorated in coloured silk, filled with fine furniture, but it did nothing to bring back a tiniest glimmer of life. I also ordered

someone to repair the ruined walls, but once they started, I ordered them to stop. Do you know why?”

Fei Zhaoxing placed the tea down and sat up straighter before cautiously reply, “The Jing-An Ducal Residence of the past will always be the Jing-An Ducal Residence of the past. No matter how much it is rebuilt, the past can never come back.”

He Xia’s thin lips moved slightly as if wanting to twitch into a smile, but it soon faded. “That’s right. What is lost will always be lost. Why is it that when people make their choices, they can never remember this? I really regret it.”

Between his words, there was actually an extremely faint expression of pain.

Fei Zhaoxing hadn’t thought He Xia would suddenly speak these words that dug at the heart. He was flattered by his trust but didn’t dare answer.

In his heart, He Xia was a man with a rare type of dignity. This kind of person was emotional but hid them well in the depths of their mind as they were afraid of others knowing them.

Fei Zhaoxing lowered his head and raised his cup once more. He took a small sip as if trying to soothe his throat.

“I murdered He Su’s entire family.” He Xia suddenly asked, “Do you know the outside gossip yet?”

Fei Zhaoxing nodded, “I’ve heard about it as well as those other gossips too.”

“What do you think?”

“The members of the Royal House from a fallen country are no more than ants. The Marquess of Jing-An has conquered the world, so what is killing a few ants in comparison?”

“I don’t need to deceive you.” He Xia looked at him in the eye before faintly smiling, “The outside rumours aren’t quite wrong. He Su and the Queen didn’t actually try to assassinate me after surrendering. I killed their family of three without reason.” Fei Zhaoxing was stunned, not knowing how to reply. He Xia changed the subject, “General Shang Lu is dead now, so who shall be in charge of the Yongchang Regiment?”

Fei Zhaoxing replied, "When the army lost their advisor, the situation was dire so the decision was made quickly. Currently, I am in charge of them."

He Xia didn't particularly mind, "Dongzhuo is old enough. It's time to give him an experience to practice. The Yun Chang capital's situation has stabled now, so I am going to get him to go out on the battlefield to learn some skills. Leave the Yongchang Regiment to him and pass the message onto him when you leave."

Fei Zhangxing answered.

No one understood why but He Xia seemed to be more in thought than usual. He sighed, standing up from his chair to say, "Come, accompany me on a walk."

Fei Zhaoxing followed him, strolling around the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

The courtyard was completely abandoned, and the pond was full of duckweed. Occasionally there would be a few bubbles, causing a tiny current on the surface. They weren't from colourful carps but rather little gray-black wild fish that somehow mysteriously gotten into the pond.

The insects in the grass cried loudly.

They trampled over the tall grass, one after the other. He Xia walked for a long time before suddenly speaking, "I didn't expect that even Gui Le would fall so quickly." His voice held a lot of emotion.

Fei Zhaoxing speculated about him. He conquered the world, yet he was more upset than before.

He quietly looked at his back view, very straight and tight like a taut string.

Perhaps it was because there would never be anything that could compete against He Xia. His army's presence in this reunion with He Xia made Fei Zhaoxing feel that it was stranger than usual by ten times. His sense of supreme majesty had already started to flow out despite not ascending to the throne yet.

"The final army of Gui Le is now destroyed, so the four countries have already been conquered as one. I plan to issue a formal edict and in the name of the Marquess of Jing-An, establish a new country with the name Jing-An."

Fei Zhaoxing hesitated before tentatively advising, "Establishing the new country is very important, but the matters regarding Chu Beijie haven't been

sorted. Shouldn't we..."

"No need to worry. Even if Chu Beijie has ten times his own ability, there is no way he can resist my army of several hundreds of thousands. What is there to fear about a barren general?" He Xia sneered, "When I ascend to the throne, my status is established. He will never be Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei but my Jing-An country's usurper. It'll be justified to kill him. Even though he isn't easy to get rid of, I'll have lots of time then so I'll deal with him slowly."

According to He Xia's thoughts, the four countries had already settled. There would never be any other opponent worth spending effort on and so he was a bit hesitant in killing Chu Beijie immediately. He rather slowly toy him to death, like a cat scratching a mouse.

One couldn't say He Xia was arrogant. After all, in the four countries, all of the armies that opposed He Xia were destroyed. What could Chu Beijie do by himself in challenging the Yun Chang army?

If he dared to openly recruit rebels, the Yun Chang army would immediately arrive, fighting with ten times more. It would be impossible for Chu Beijie to escape death then.

Fei Zhaoxing's heart felt rather unsettled, but after hearing He Xia's relaxed tone, he realised he couldn't convince him. He just remained silent, nodding.

He Xia suddenly stopped. "There's one thing I need you to do."

"Yes."

"I want you to collect every country's treasures, pearls and precious stones. Find a group of craftsmen that studies jewels."

Fei Zhaoxing understood, asking, "To create the King's crown, correct?"

He Xia shook his head, raising two fingers. "Two. One is the King's crown, the other is the Queen's. Both must be exquisite to perfection, not a hint of error."

Fei Zhaoxing answered and left after receiving a few more instructions from He Xia.

After returning to the residence and making provisional arrangements, Fei Zhaoxing began to think. He kept thinking something was wrong and called for a

confidant who was left guarding Gui Le. “Did the Marquess of Jing An meet a woman after returning to Gui Le?”

That confidant pondered carefully, shaking his head, “Didn’t hear anything about him getting close to a woman. After arriving in Gui Le, he immediately went to deal with various matters near the Jing-An Ducal Residence. It’s not strange though. It’s inevitable, wanting to pay tribute to dead relatives when seeing former homes.”

Fei Zhaoxing felt there was a lump in his throat, but he couldn’t think of what to say. He just felt like he was missing something. While he was thinking, another subordinate came to report the items He Xia rewarded him had arrived at his door.

Fei Zhaoxing personally went to pick them up. When he opened one of the boxes, he realised all of them were extremely rare. It seemed He Xia rewarded generously and would by no means be a stingy king in the future.

Fei Zhaoxing was secretly pleased and rewarded the deliverers a handsome sum. He Xia’s bodyguard Toumu had also come, grinning while congratulating Fei Zhaoxing. “I have been ordered to come here for another reason too. It’s about General Dongzhuo being in charge of the Yongchang Regiment; please, General Fei, use the military stamp and pass on the rights clearly.”

Fei Zhaoxing knew about this already. He cheerfully took the document over and stamped it to exchange rights to the Yongchang Regiment. He then sent away the soldiers who’d gotten quite a bit of reward.

Because of his secret delight, although it was just the end of a long journey, Fei Zhaoxing couldn’t sleep early. He summoned a few of his subordinate generals to drink with him to celebrate.

“Come on, cheers! This cup is dedicated to our general who is slowly rising through the ranks with immeasurable potential for the future. It’s also dedicated to our Prince Consort so that he may ascend to the throne soon!”

One of the lieutenants hurriedly urged, “Don’t mention the title, the Prince Consort. The orders from above say that from now on, we must address him as the Marquess of Jing-An. General Zhang, you’d better be careful not to break the rules.”

“Heh, I am a man who fights on the battlefield. No way am I gonna care about rules. Cheers!” That lieutenant was still about to persuade him when General Zhang suddenly waved his hands, impatiently shouting, “I know, I know. The Marquess of Jing-An won’t be called that for much longer either, but the Emperor. I heard those civil service workers are claiming to be officials too.”

The generals were all strictly forbidden from alcohol on the battlefield. From their long abstinence, they greedily and happily drank several pots. Fei Zhaoxing stumbled in his haze and was somehow supported back to his bed.

His sleep was dreamy when there was a sudden jolt of cold for some reason, causing him to sober.

Suddenly opening his eyes, Fei Zhaoxing stiffly sat up from his bed. His heart hammered nonstop, feeling uneasy as if trying to jump out.

There had to be something wrong.

He had a strange sort of trust in his own intuition.

He felt a sudden unrest in his heart when Le Zhen prepared to murder him last time. He bolted out of the city at night to escape. His heart was now trembling. He couldn’t help but be careful. He repeated the conversation he had with He Xia over and over again, thinking about it again and again but couldn’t find anything strange.

He had done everything He Xia wanted him to do. He had not only ruined the Dong Lin army but killed Le Di and Le Zhen as well as deal with Shang Lu. How could he do any better than this?

If it was about how he was usually a little too greedy about gold and jewelry, He Xia should’ve had an idea about it earlier and wouldn’t do harm to him for such an insignificant reason.

What on earth went wrong?

Could it be another stewing for the hounds once all the hares were killed, or the setting aside the bow when all the birds are shot-like action? Fei Zhaoxing stiffened but then shook his head.

No, no, He Xia wasn’t Le Di, wasn’t Le Zhen. He was the Marquess of Jing-An,

ingenious and tolerant.

After the war finished, the new country would be established. It wouldn't be strange if he wasn't as courteous as before. But as long as he was willing to share a little bit of his great wealth, Fei Zhaoxing was all right.

He tried to think but couldn't think of anything before finally dozing off.

But from thereon, he really did become a bit more careful and a lot more cautious.

Moving rapidly, Chu Beijie and his men headed for Qierou. At first he was a bit afraid the road would be exhausting, and Pingting wouldn't be able to take it.

But Pingting was also someone who often accompanied on the army's expeditions both near and far, so Chu Beijie's worry was quickly dissolved, wholeheartedly dedicating himself to hurrying along.

The ten thousand elite soldiers disbanded at the borders to sneak into Yun Chang territory and quietly met in the outer suburbs of Qierou.

These people were all veterans refined by massive battles. Each, handpicked by Moran and instructed over and over again, were as slippery as ghosts, not making the slightest error.

Not a single alarm sounded by the time a thousand people snuck into Qierou. The Yun Chang army had no idea an entire enemy regiment had gotten so close. The people of Qierou city knew nothing of this impending disaster.

And Fanlu didn't know he had become the target of the Duke of Zhen-Bei either.

This Governor of Qierou was currently pained over something completely irrelevant to Chu Beijie.

"They just want to force me to die! Fine, come on! Being in the army for so long, there's absolutely nothing I can't overcome!" The documents that just arrived was crushed to balls by Fanlu and mercilessly thrown onto the ground. The Governor's voice could be heard throughout the residence as he yelled, "How do I know where those two Sirs went? So many people witnessed them leaving Qierou, not to mention they often left flexibly. Maybe they crossed the

borders long ago too. What's the point of sending me documents asking me to find them when they're already gone? To hell with this!"

The messenger in charge had long been scared away, only leaving Clerk Dujing. He frowned as he watched Fanlu, who appeared to have been stabbed on her behind, as he angrily paced up and down the room.

The Governor's fury was really quite something today.

"Sir, please calm down. Although this document is unreasonable, it still the higher-up's wishes so we can't just ignore it. This..."

"I know we can't just ignore it." Fanlu continued to rage for a few moments, venting out until his anger calmed. His body then seemed to relax. He shockingly began to laugh. His toe touched the rolling balls of documents when he suddenly added power, kicking it right into the corner.

He swaggered to a seat in his chair before nonchalantly propping his legs onto the table. "Hm, then we'll track them down. Clerk, for the Qierou city bulletin board, put up paintings of the two p...no, the two Sirs. Make sure to draw realistically and write..." He chewed on an end of a brush in his mouth, ambiguously instructing, "Two officials have been lost hence the Governor is looking for them. If alive, bring persons; if dead, bring corpses to me. The discoverer will be rewarded one hundred silver coins if alive and two hundred silver coins if dead. Just do that."

From his tone, Dujing could tell Sir Pu Guang and Sir Pu Sheng annoyed him greatly, but he wasn't too sure whether he was joking or not. He was almost in tears as he said, "Sir, I'm afraid one hundred silver coins is a bit too little if they are alive. Hm, as for dead, it's better not to add too much."

"Ok, ok, it's up to you." Fanlu waved his hand and sneezed, "Today's formal work has been done. Go post on the bulletin board soon; I have to get some rest."

After turning at the backyard, he grabbed onto Zuiju's wrist, heading straight out of the door.

Zuiju let herself be pulled. She was rather dumbfounded, "What's wrong now? You ought to look at the fleeing-like expression of yours."

“It’s a good day. Accompany me on a relaxation trip.”

At these words, Zuiju stopped moving. She tried to pull her wrist away, “Let go, my little plants still haven’t been watered. Why would I let them wither just because Sir wants to have some relaxation time?”

Fanlu refused to release her wrist, not loosening in the slightest. He turned back to look at her, “A document has arrived today. Big news, Sir Pu Guang and Pu Sheng have both disappeared and the higher-ups want me to track them down. Hey, are you going to accompany me?”

Zuiju was taken aback, and she looked around.

No one knew better than these two about the deaths of Pu Guang and Pu Sheng.

After He Xia obtained power, Yun Chang pulled out a bunch of heavy punishments, causing panic everywhere. Zuiju reckoned she need to find a place and carefully discuss the matter with Fanlu. While she hesitated for a few moments as she processed the thought of Fanlu not calling her out for that, he pulled her away, leaving the residence gates carefree.

Although Qierou was a small city, the streets were still quite lively. Fanlu left wearing civilian clothes while Zuiju never particularly liked wearing refined clothes, so the two didn’t catch any attention as they took the road.

“Want some Tanhulu?”

“One bowl of soybean curd then?”

Fanlu stopped often from his walk. When he saw something he liked, he’d rummage for some money, buy it and give it to Zuiju. Zuiju would vigorously shake her head, indicating she didn’t want it. Fanlu would then give it to some random child on the streets. In the end, Zuiju couldn’t help but accept a small doll from him.

Even after walking for the entire afternoon, Fanlu didn’t say a single useful thing. He obviously didn’t plan to mention Pu Guang and Pu Sheng.

Holding onto the doll, Zuiju couldn’t help saying, “Hey, speak.”

“Speak about what?”

“What should we do? Leave the city?”

Fanlu turned around and studied her. He mused, “You really thought we were escaping?”

From his expression, Zuiju could tell he wasn’t lying, but then again, his words could never be trusted. She lowered her voice, persisting, “Then why’d you take me out? Didn’t those documents tell you to track them down? If the truth gets out, you can’t be saved from the fate of execution even if you had a hundred heads.”

“I told you earlier. You’re accompanying me on a relaxation trip. You really have a guilty conscience, forcibly linking everything to escaping.” Fanlu pulled a face before beckoning the city gates with his chin. “I started tracking them down ages ago. Can’t you see that announcement?”

When it came to important matters, Zuiju took them a hundred times more seriously. Hearing how he’d put up an announcement, she immediately wanted to check. She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the city gates without another word.

Fanlu was the one who usually grabbed her hand, so this was the first time Zuiju grabbed onto Fanlu first.

She didn’t do it on purpose. The touch of her soft hand made Fanlu’s heart thump rapidly for several moments. He eyed Zuiju curiously, but Zuiju was wholeheartedly worrying so she didn’t notice his glances.

Dujing wasn’t one to stall his duties. The announcement was indeed posted onto the city gates. The people drawn on it looked quite vicious. Because Pu Guang and Pu Sheng were notorious, all of the peasants were rather calm after seeing the announcement, seeing potential gossip. Zuiju was mixed into the crowd as she read the announcement and relieved to find that it was just a normal tracking. She lowered her voice, “Did you write this?”

Fanlu harrumphed, cursing, “Damn, that bastard Dujing changed ma words. That clerk ain’t good.”

Zuiju was taken aback, “What did he change?”

“Originally I wrote ‘two pigs were lost’, but why’d it change to ‘two lost

officials' now?"

Zuiju chuckled, holding back her laughter as she glared at him, "What governor are you, always being unserious and trying to amuse others?"

Fanlu never admitted defeat when it came to playing with words, but he just grunted a bit, not retorting back. He simply said, "Now that you've seen the announcement, let's go."

The two people held hands as they turned back. Fanlu suddenly lowered his voice, "Are you afraid of seeing dead people?"

Zuiju frowned, "You're going to kill again?"

She just casually asked this but didn't expect that Fanlu would answer, "Yes."

Zuiju's heart fell and her grip tightened on Fanlu's hand.

Fanlu's voice was even lower than before as if the tiniest whisper. "A hardly noticeable person has been following us for a while now. Don't be afraid, I'll lead him to a dark alley and then, as if on the mountains to hunt, silently finish him off with a few shots like a rabbit."

After a few turns, the bustling sounds of activity gradually decreased. The alleys became smaller and smaller as the two walked into it. The gap became incredibly small that not even the sun was fully capable of shining through.

The deeper inside, the darker it seemed.

Fanlu always had a wild personality in the army. Thanks to being a governor who read scrolls and scrolls of letters or documents, he dying for someone to be his target to have some fun. As a spy, he was exceptionally sensitive. He knew there was only one person following him so he chose a dead end without too much worry. When he saw the wall, he turned around, one hand holding Zuiju's hand and the other taking out the light crossbow from behind his waist. After silently placing his bow on the string, he asked Zuiju, "Would you rather I shoot his neck or his heart?"

Zuiju watched the cold gleam of the arrow head. She shivered, "Don't ask me." She clutched onto Fanlu's hand even tighter.

This made Fanlu even happier. His mouth lifted to a cold smile, "My friend who

has been following us, do come out. Let us chat a bit.”

A figure moved in the corner not long after. A person slowly stepped out from there. He smiled, “I’m really delighted to see you. Why didn’t you send us a letter to tell us, didn’t you know how worried we were?” He spoke directly to Zuiju.

Zuiju’s eyes widened. She lost her voice, “Moran!”

Moran nodded, before his gaze finally flickered to Fanlu. His articulation was clear, “Governor, you’re lucky. If I hadn’t seen Zuiju beside you, I’m afraid you would’ve been decapitated already.”

Fanlu began to chuckle and turned to Zuiju. “I prefer the neck. Once the arrow hits, it’d immediately make him shut up.” He was about to lower his crossbow when he suddenly stiffened.

A sharp, icy cold sword had silently reached out and placed itself on his neck as if impartial to the situation.

A deep man’s voice began to laugh, “I prefer the neck too.”

Fanlu was a bit conceited about his sharp senses, but he’d never been crept up from behind so quietly. He was shocked.

He specialised in probing the enemy in depth. Hearing the calm dignity in the voice of the man behind, Fanlu immediately knew this man was no ordinary expert. He good-graciously lowered his crossbow, forcing a laugh, “In the very end, I was the unfortunate rabbit after all.”

Zuiju looked behind and was even more surprised. Her hands went to her mouth as she cried, “My god, it’s the Duke...”

Chu Beijie was standing behind Fanlu and acknowledged Zuiju with a glance. “You really made Pingting upset for a long time.”

“Miss Bai?” Zuiju’s felt like her heart had been stimulated too many times and hurriedly clutched onto her chest. It felt like waves of fireworks began to filter out, so pretty that it made her want to cry. She took several deep breaths, before stuttering, “Miss Bai...she’s still alive? That’s great...that’s great...the child? That child...”

“You can have a nice chat later. Look, my neck still has this thing on it,” Fanlu

cut off her words.

Zuiju was far too moved. She wiped away her tears with one hand while staring at him, “How can you boss me around at this time? Do you know who’s behind you? Be careful or he’ll budge that sword into your neck.”

From their conversation, Fanlu already guessed he was the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Forget about other opponents. If it’s the Duke of Zhen-Bei who’d placed the sword on his neck, then he wouldn’t be able to escape even if he was ten times stronger. He was more flexible than most and decided the skies would collect his life when it was due. He stopped fearing, having a rather giddy expression instead. “You won’t miss me?”

Zuiju was greatly embarrassed by his smile in front of Chu Beijie and Moran. She blushed, “You, you...you’re always bullying me. I want the Duke to kill you for revenge!”

Fanlu was about to talk when his neck suddenly felt cold. The blade shifted slightly into his skin, causing a prickling pain.

“Kyaa!” Zuiju saw some blood trickling out from Fanlu’s neck and was almost scared out of her wits. She gasped, “Duke, Duke, I’m just kidding, please don’t...”

Moran had already guessed more or less about their relationship when he saw them. He threw Chu Beijie a questioning glance. Chu Beijie quietly nodded when Moran calmly said, “Flirting, fighting, and chatting can come later. Governor, we came here today because we’d like to discuss something with you.”

Fanlu’s mind worked fast. He Xia was currently at the height of his power. Why else would the Duke of Zhen-Bei suddenly appear in the tiny city of Qierou for? He replied, “The reason you’re interested in me, despite having a lowly rank of a governor, is only because of the military resource supplies that pass by here. Because of Senior Official Gui, He Xia doesn’t treat me as a human. Even little cats and dogs try to toy with me. I’ve had enough. In short, I don’t mind surrendering the town to Duke of Zhen-Bei at all, but I have a condition.”

Chu Beijie saw him reveal his intentions in one go, and his heart was slightly surprised. Why was such rare talent in the army assigned to the tiny town of Qierou? Chu Beijie watched him speak for a bit until he suddenly made a

condition, but he already had the gist of it anyway. He loosened the sword slightly so it was no longer pressed against the skin. He beckoned at Moran.

Moran asked, "What condition?"

Fanlu thought for a bit and suddenly changed his mind. "Hm, wrong, my Qierou is a city in the end. It's not worthwhile to exchange for a single condition so I want two."

This was the first time Moran met such a cloven person so he was stunned.

Zuiju knew what he was like. She raised her head to look at the blood drops on his neck, secretly hating how he still dared to provoke Chu Beijie at such a time. She hurried said, "Can't you speak a bit less?" For some reason she didn't know her hands kept on shaking. Thinking that the Duke may let her off for Miss Bai, she gave Chu Beijie a pleading look, "Duke, his personality is just like that. Don't blame him."

Seeing her like that, Fanlu's heart felt sweeter than honey. He didn't care whether his life was at stake or not; he just roared in laughter.

Zuiju was both worried and angry. She pinched his hand, hard.

Chu Beijie indifferently observed the two people. He thought for a while before murmuring, "Say your two conditions."

Fanlu already knew Chu Beijie would accept it. He laughed, "First, I want Zuiju."

Zuiju softly gasped, her blush spreading past her ears. She didn't quite know whether to stand or to hide. She mumbled a curse, "How could you ask the Duke for me when I'm not a thing?"

Fanlu said, "I'm making my conditions to the Duke of Zhen-Bei. It's none of your business, is it?" That made Zuiju almost faint in anger.

Chu Beijie nodded. "I can promise this condition to you."

Fanlu then asked, "She isn't a thing. How could you promise that she'll be with me?"

"That's easy." Chu Beijie slowly said, "I'll ask her whether she agrees with my sword pointed at your fingers. For every disagreement she makes, I will cut off a

finger. I assure you that she will agree before all ten are cut off.”

Fanlu couldn't help be a bit shocked. He muttered, “Quite the brutal method.”

The three men were quiet for a few moments before bursting into laughter. Chu Beijie took this gap to retrieve the sword from Fanlu's neck.

Zuiju was completely red from their laughter. She clenched her teeth, “Men aren't good; you're all in the same team.” She then turned to Fanlu, ranting, “Even if all of your fingers and toes have been cut off, I won't bother paying attention. It's not like I'm a maid sold to the Duke, so none of you can do anything about me!”

Chu Beijie faintly replied, “Then just try it.”

Zuiju was alarmed by this. She knew Chu Beijie's actions were always the same as his words. It wasn't like those fingers belonged to Chu Beijie so even if he did chop them off, what did he have to lose? Judging from Moran's earlier words, it seemed like they were planning to kill the Governor of Qierou at first.

Zuiju heard of nobles joking about killing people and was terribly afraid that she'd really cause harm to Fanlu. She didn't dare act stubborn, so she closed her mouth tightly, not saying any more.

“What's the second condition?” Moran asked.

Fanlu laughed, “I haven't thought of it yet. Is it fine to mention it in the future?”

Chu Beijie noted that this man was very flexible and alert as well as incredibly dedicated to Zuiju, making him very likeable. The corners of his mouth revealed a faint smile, “Fine.”

Fanlu asked, “How many people did the Duke of Zhen-Bei bring inside?”

“Only we two came inside.”

“Only two?”

Fanlu was secretly surprised. Chu Beijie was really courageous. If his identity was to get out, a whole city worth of soldiers would immediately be summoned. There was no chance of survival if surrounded.

Chu Beijie breezily mentioned, "Two is enough."

Originally they only come in to check the situation. They hadn't expected that right after slipping past the city guards, they'd see the Governor in civilian clothing. They were even more surprised to find the person accompanying him was the Zuiju who Pingting had been distraught about. There was no way Chu Beijie would let go of such a great chance.

The three people were in the army for a long time. They wasted no time, immediately making preparations for alliance. They planned to meet in the Governor Residence street in the evening.

As Chu Beijie was about to leave with Moran, Fanlu asked, "Aren't you afraid of me taking the city back?"

Moran glanced at Zuiju, replying, "With Zuiju as a hostage, there's no way you dare take it back."

Fanlu's expression suddenly changed. He sternly replied, "Don't you dare think about taking her away." He thought for a bit and a threatening smile floated onto his face, "The moment I lose sight of her is the moment I'll declare you to the higher ups. If not, then you can kill me now."

Seeing how nervous he was, Chu Beijie thought it rather amusing. He lowered his voice, "We won't take her away. You can have Zuiju as a hostage while we'll have her Teacher as a hostage. Both sides can be at ease." Hearing someone else outside of the alley, he gave an alerting expression at Moran.

Time was running out. The two nodded at Fanlu and hurriedly disappeared without saying another word.

Fanlu stood on the spot, watching them go away.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei really deserved his reputation. At the very least, his assassination technique while remaining hidden was already something very few could match.

Apart from those stoic guards of monarchs, perhaps no one could not live in fear after dealing with Chu Beijie.

Fanlu's arm was suddenly heavily shaken a few times. He turned around.

Zuiju was excited, her eyes large and round. “Did you hear that? It’s Teacher! Teacher has come too, ah...I didn’t hear that wrong right? I didn’t hear that wrong, right?” She took several deep breaths, her heart thudding in her chest. She sighed, “Oh god, all the good news has come today. Coming out for a relaxation trip was right. Miss Bai didn’t die, the Duke has come, Teacher has come too...” She rubbed her eyes and began to cry.

Fanlu was originally impatient, but once seeing her cry, he could only try to cheer her up. “Why are you crying again when you should laugh when you’re happy? It’s getting dark, let’s go back.”

Zuiju continued to sob lightly, shaking her head, “My heart’s too much of a mess, and my feet feel soft. Don’t worry about me.”

Fanlu began to chuckle, “I sold Qierou City for you; my heart’s even messier. But from now on, you’re mine. I’ll just be a bit unlucky and carry you back to the residence.”

At his mention, Zuiju couldn’t help give him another glance. She softly asked, “You allied yourself with a former enemy for me. Don’t you feel rather bad about it?”

Fanlu harrumphed, “The Royal House of Yun Chang has completely died and He Xia is planning to make a new country. No one can say I’m betraying my country. At most, I’m only betraying He Xia. What’s there to feel bad about?”

Chu Beijie received good news on his very first visit to Qierou, and he was delighted. When he returned to the temporary campsite beyond the Qierou suburbs, he instructed to Moran, “Don’t tell anyone about what happened today yet. I want to give Pingting a surprise.”

Moran said, “Genius Doctor Huo will be greatly surprised too.”

“Of course.”

The two finished discussing and entered the tent together. Everyone inside was waiting for their news. Pingting was worrying about Chu Beijie’s return after entering the city, but she instantly relaxed after seeing his figure. She stood up to welcome them back, “What’s the situation in Qierou? We’ve just discussed here, forming many different strategies, but each has a little flaw in them. It’s

rather difficult not letting others notice this little city.” She picked up the recently written scroll on the table and handed it to Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie skimmed it before putting it down. A smile floated onto his face, “I thought of a better plan.”

He was the main advisor. His confidence meant he thought of a good plan. The crowd was delighted, collectively asking, “What plan does Duke have?”

“We shall formally enter the city and go meet the Governor according to the rules. Everyone will sit down and calmly talk out the conditions, convincing him to oppose He Xia.”

The crowd were waiting eagerly. Hearing Chu Beijie’s breezy words, they couldn’t help feel discouraged. They bitterly smiled, “Duke is joking with us.”

But Pingting deeply understood Chu Beijie would never joke about military affairs. She thought for a few moments, asking Chu Beijie, “Did Duke see the Governor of Qierou during the infiltration today? Was the general promoted by He Xia or raised by Gui Changqing?”

This question was to the point. Moran stood aside, loudly praising her.

If Fanlu hadn’t been on Gui Changqing’s faction and suffered immensely under He Xia’s faction, then even if he had Zuiju by his side, he may not have sold Qierou immediately after seeing Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie saw Pingting’s black eyes were fixed on him. He couldn’t help hold onto her little hand, quietly replying, “Pingting guessed correctly. I really want to give up my position as main advisor. Apart from that, there’s another reason. Please guess, Pingting.”

The crowd saw how close the two were. They didn’t dare make a sound, just holding back their smiles as they watched.

Pingting lowered her voice, “If I had to guess more, then Duke probably attacked, letting the Governor know strong he is.”

Moran applauded, “As expected of Miss Bai to guess even that. Duke’s ability to assassinate is something that even the greatest generals of the four countries are terrified of.”

Chu Beijie continued to smile, “Guess a little bit deeper.”

Pingting frowned for a long time. She shook her head, “Can’t guess any deeper; it’s not like I’m a god.”

“I’ll give you a hint. I’m going to go in with genius Doctor Huo tonight.”

Pingting mumbled “Oh” before asking, “The Governor of Qierou has someone he really cares about who is sick?”

If he had really been oppressed by the He Xia faction and threatened by Chu Beijie’s action, not to mention an important family or friend being sick, agreeing to him wasn’t entirely impossible.

Chu Beijie said, “Who doesn’t have someone they really care about? The matter about Qierou has been sorted anyhow. The gods did a huge favour for us this time. Come with me tonight and you’ll understand.”

When night was about to fall, Chu Beijie really did lead Pingting to get Huo Yunan. They chose a few elite subordinates and snuck into the city before the gates closed.

While Pingting wasn’t paying attention, Moran quietly asked Chu Beijie, “I thought again and again, but I still think it’s a bit too much of a risk. What should we do if that person takes it back, selling Duke? If it’s just us two, then we’ll still be able to force our way out, but I’m worried about Miss Bai or genius Doctor Huo.”

Chu Beijie calmly replied, “You still haven’t met your beloved woman. When you meet her, you’ll know why he won’t ever take it back. What, do you not believe in my judgement?” Being a main advisor meant being a good judgement of character. Chu Beijie rarely made errors at this and Moran calmed at his words.

The group stopped outside the Governor Residence. They declared themselves as old friends from far away and had come to see Fanlu. The cabinet officer had long been notified by Fanlu who said he had a few old friends coming along. He was supposed to attend to them properly and immediately run inside to pass on their arrival.

Not long later, Fanlu personally came out. He made a submissive gesture when

seeing Chu Beijie, “Long time no see, is Brother doing well?” He warmly beckoned Chu Beijie inside.

None of the elite soldiers accompanying Chu Beijie knew what they were up to. They thought boldly showing up on an enemy Governor Residence was certain death but obeyed because Chu Beijie’s command was absolute. Seeing how the Governor was acting, half of their worries were put to rest, but they didn’t dare drop their guards. Their hands tightened around their sword hilts, not leaving an inch away from Chu Beijie’s body.

Only Pingting knew Chu Beijie wasn’t rash. She knew he was certain about these actions and so followed him without complaint.

Fanlu lead the crowd into an inner room. He dismissed unrelated people before letting go of Chu Beijie’s hand. Moran introduced everyone from one side. He pointed at Pingting, “This is Miss Bai.”

Pingting had never seen Fanlu, so she only thought of him as a stranger as she politely inclined her head. She had no idea this man had a deep connection to the tangled matter of her own fake death.

Fanlu knew if it hadn’t been for this woman, he might not have been able to meet Zuiju. Thinking of Zuiju, he gave Pingting a rather odd smile.

Moran then pointed at Huo Yunan, “This is genius Doctor Huo.”

Once these words came out, Fanlu’s expression became serious. He actually fell to his knees onto the ground with a thump.

Huo Yunan was shocked. He knew this person was very important to the Duke of Zhen-Bei and hurriedly tried to help him up. “No, no, I don’t deserve this. Allow me to see the important person who has gotten sick. I’m not a talented old man, but my medical skills are decent.”

Fanlu stubbornly remained kneeling. “No one’s sick. I just have a request to make to you. My name is Fanlu. I look handsome, have great health, shoot brilliantly with a crossbow, treat people wholeheartedly, super smart, learn faster than everyone...”

His speaking pace quickened as he spoke a bunch of random things. Apart from Chu Beijie and Moran, no one else could get their heads around it. After Fanlu

spluttered out every possible feature he didn't have, he asked Huo Yunan, "See, are you satisfied with someone like me?"

Huo Yunan felt rather faint headed by his words. He thought Fanlu was kneeling because he wanted to learn medicine. He only had one disciple, Zuiju, for this lifetime and didn't want to take on another, but knowing how important this governor was to the Duke of Zhen-Bei's big plan, he didn't dare offend him. He vaguely replied, "How could I not be satisfied with such talent?"

Hearing these words, Fanlu surprisingly replied, "Then I shall kowtow three times, loud enough to hear."

"No! No, I don't deserve..."

But Huo Yunan's words had yet to fall when Fanlu bowed three times with three thuds. He then stood, his face devoid of its earlier seriousness. He grinned, "Can't deny it now, having received my bows. I'll call you Father-in-Law from now on."

At these words, not only Huo Yunan but even Pingting was shocked.

The crowd exchanged looks while Fanlu seemed to have won a battle or something. He lively jumped up from the ground, rushing down the stairs, loudly yelling, "Fiancee! Fanlu's fiancée! Come greet your Teacher also known as my Father-in-Law."

He had tricked Zuiju into a small room and promised her over and over again that he'd notify her the moment Chu Beijie appeared. But Fanlu hadn't notified Zuiju after Chu Beijie's arrival but butchered up Huo Yunan before everything.

Zuiju had been in the room, restlessly waiting for her Teacher and Miss Bai. Suddenly hearing Fanlu's call from upstairs, she bolted upstairs like crazy. Once she'd stepped into the room, she was faced with familiar faces and choked out, "Miss Bai..." She then turned again, and although she prepared herself earlier, she was completely startled seeing her Teacher right in front of her, much thinner than before.

The room was so quiet that even the dropping of a pin could be heard.

Zuiju blankly stood for a long time before her shoulders suddenly shook. She burst into tears, "Teacher! Teacher!"

Huo Yunan stared.

He could no longer hear anything from the moment Zuiju appeared. He felt like he'd stepped onto a group of clouds, his delight so great that all of the things in his mind had just been blown away.

Zuiju, it was that little girl Zuiju...

That physique, that sharp chin, those dark eyes, that expressions...were all of that child Zuiju.

His wise eyes aged by long years gradually became denser. His lips shook yet unable to utter a single word.

A strong energy surged forwards, wrapping around him tightly. The sounds of crying entered his ear, a sound so familiar that it even made such an old man like him want to cry too.

"Teacher...teacher, I finally get to see you."

Huo Yunan lowered his head. His vision was fuzzy. Through the haze, he saw his beloved disciple already buried in his arms, sobbing. His thoughts were a mess as he mumbled, "Child, child..." He didn't need to ask anything. He just stroked her back like in the past.

Pingting's chest felt like it was hurting, and it was a long time before she could finally breathe. She stayed rooted to the spot, her eyes brightly flashing. Someone tugged at her sleeve, and she slowly turned her head. Chu Beijie smiled at her, "Cry in my arms."

Pingting buried herself and couldn't help sob.

The crowd finally understood. They joyfully watched the two girls sobbing away like rain. Even genius Doctor Huo's eyes were red.

Moran stood aside and smiled.

After quietly standing for a while, Fanlu saw Zuiju was still crying without end. He came forwards to tease her, "Don't cry. Your Teacher has agreed to accept me as his Son-in-Law. I have already loudly kowtowed three times. Hey, you should do three too."

Zuiju wiped the tears off her face, staring at him, "Who wanted you to

kowtow?" She had been crying real hard just a few moments ago, so her eyes were red and swollen. Her voice was a bit hoarse too. She then asked Fanlu, "Why would you call my Teacher your Father-in-Law?"

Fanlu had no objection, freely saying, "Fine, I'll call him Teacher too."

Huo Yunan's heart felt like it was flying after seeing his disciple. He had never been so delighted and painstakingly stopped his tears. Seeing their argument, he looked at Zuiju a bit closer and instantly understood when he saw a faint blush. The delight in his heart became even greater and his nose felt a bit sour again. He quickly covered it up by laughing, "Father-in-Law or Teacher is up to you, and you don't have to kowtow. You just have to look after my disciple."

Zuiju was hugely embarrassed, "Teacher!"

It would've been dismissed if she hadn't yelped, but as she did, everyone laughed. Pingting also wiped away her tears while in Chu Beijie's embrace. She raised her head, wanting to speak. Chu Beijie blamed himself for trying to hide the fact about Zuiju and hurriedly added, "The important matters are urgent; let's discuss them first."

Everyone knew the situation was dire. They became serious, "Then without futhur ado, let's stop this idle chat."

Fanlu brought a table forward. He rolled out a scroll on it, his face no longer smiling. "This is the map of Qierou and its neighbouring territory. The five lines in vermilion are the routes of the military's food supply and will all intersect here at Qierou."

He drew this map himself, and it was many times more refined than normal maps. Chu Beijie gave him a look of appreciation, secretly approving of him.

Zuiju didn't understand soldiers or war, so after her big cry at her Teacher's, she thought of Pingting again. She spoke to Huo Yunan, "Teacher, let's go to the room next door and let Zuiju massage for you like in the past?" She looked at Pingting smiled at her with a tearstained face. Immense joy hid in her eyes. As Zuiju walked over, saying, "Miss Bai, we're going to the room next door."

Pingting really wanted to know everything about her right there and then. She pulled her hand, going with her and Huo Yunan into the room next door.

The three people sat down. Zuiju personally served tea, each having their own cups. She then slowly massaged her Teacher's back while recounting in detail what happened after leaving behind Pingting.

Because she was afraid Huo Yunan and Pingting would get angry at Fanlu hence she skipped some of the bad things Fanlu had done.

Huo Yunan listened and chuckled, "You say that he's bad, but he hasn't really done anything bad."

Pingting asked, "Do you like him?"

Zuiju's cheeks were slightly red. She frowned, "Who likes him?"

Both Huo Yunan and Pingting thought, she really does like him.

The three people chatted for a long time while the men on the other side were also in full swing.

Chu Beijie outlined their original plan to Fanlu, who immediately laughed, "Duke has found the right person for this. I've messed around in the army for many years, so I know the army very well. I know which generals of Yun Chang could easily come round as well as the ones who are the firmest."

Chu Beijie was delighted, quickly making his decision. "That's good. Please immediately write a form so we may execute the plan properly."

Pingting was on the other side. After saying goodbye to Zuiju on the day she thought of the supposed death by wolves. She remembered the uncomfortable painful feeling as well as the numerous tears she'd shed. She sighed a few times before mentioning her lively and cute Changxiao. Her tears gradually stopped before she went into the room with Chu Beijie and the others.

When entering, Pingting asked, "Has discussion gone well?"

Chu Beijie turned around and laughed. "It was godsend. Ah, the matter about the military supplies has changed slightly. This time Advisor Bai will surely need to help." He bowed at Pingting.

Pingting knew he was joking and passively let it past. She asked Chu Beijie, "I won't fall for Duke's trap. I bet if I accept this bow, then there's definitely something difficult I have to do. What part has been changed about the military

supplies plan?”

She rolled her eyes. Everyone around her was acting mysteriously, their faces enthusiastic. Chu Beijie had definitely thought of some amazing idea.

Chu Beijie smiled at her. He paused for effect before saying, “We’re not putting poison, just a drug.”

Pingting listened, her eyes furrowed as she pondered. Her delicate eyebrows suddenly loosened. She softly sighed, “What an amazing plan. Rest assured Duke, Pingting will definitely prepare the drug you need.”

The other people were used to seeing Pingting’s crafty plans, so they just smiled. Fanlu couldn’t help study Pingting for a bit, secretly surprised.

After the assembly, Fanlu acknowledged the crowd as old friends to the cabinet officer. After saying goodbye to Chu Beijie and the others, he headed for Zuiju’s room like usual.

Just as he got to the room, Zuiju suddenly ran out, standing pressed against the door. “What are you here for? I’m going to talk with my Teacher tonight.”

Fanlu looked at her, rather mockingly. “What about tomorrow night?”

“You aren’t allowed to come tomorrow either.”

Fanlu shrugged, turning to leave.

“Hey.” Zuiju was afraid he was angry and hurriedly called him to stop. She asked, “What do you think, now that you’ve seen them?”

Fanlu thought for a bit and suddenly deeply sighed. “I finally understand why He Xia and Senior Official Gui pulled their guts out to use every method possible to keep them apart.”

Who else in the world could compare to them when the two were together?

In hindsight, it seemed that it really was reasonable why He Xia tried to snatch Bai Pingting away from Dong Lin...

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 70

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch70

The wind tapped on the curtains, rustling them towards the courtyard.

Under the same moonlight, He Xia was sitting alone, not asleep.

After everyone's repeated urgings, He Xia went to the Royal Residence of Gui Le. These brilliant golden walls made him even angrier than facing the overgrown wilderness of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

It's difficult to sleep.

After all the tangible enemies were removed, invisible enemies quietly emerged.

The four countries were crushed by the war horses' hooves, and after all the official armies that dared to resist him were eradicated, a new instability emerged instead.

The rumours were spread everywhere.

The Yun Chang army had nothing to do now that they lost their opponents. They were harder to control than before, and the generals' greed became even more difficult to fulfill.

He Xia restlessly paced by the window. He tried to restrain himself and sat down again, carefully studying the document on the table.

There had been absolutely no news from the party sent out to track down Chu Beijie, and they couldn't find any real clues to their whereabouts. As expected of Chu Beijie, he could really hold back. He didn't when the Yun Chang army was attacking Gui Le, using it as an opportunity for public recruitment. He didn't declare it himself, summoning all the remaining rebels to resist.

He Xia guessed this much long ago and even gave Chu Beijie chances to do them, but Chu Beijie didn't.

It was a little unexpected.

That person was just like a breath of wind, briefly popping out in the east before briefly popping out in the west. With just a few little tricks, they played until the tens of thousands of Yun Chang troops were a mess.

But in Bei Mo, there were rumours about the former Main General of Bei Mo, Ruohan, secretly recruiting.

"Someone come."

Two guards and two officers on night shift came out from behind the curtain. They stood in two rows as they bowed, "Here."

He Xia asked, "How has Bei Mo's recruiting been?"

"There are young men escaping from the Bei Mo villages, approximately a dozen hundred every day to somewhere unknown. I have sent several orders about severe punishment, but those damn Bei Mo people seem to have gotten used to seeing fresh blood. They are no longer afraid of cruel punishment and escape without fear or death. I heard the little thief Ruo Han has secretly constructed several recruitment camps. I've sent spies who destroyed two or three of them, but..."

"I didn't ask you about those remnants." He Xia coldly replied, "I asked you about how many we have recruited after putting up our announcements?"

The person standing at the front lowered his head even more. He Xia coldly grunted. He hesitated for a few moments before finally reporting. "So far, about...about...four hundred maybe?"

He Xia was furious, wanting to slam his fist onto the table. He forced himself to hold back, lowering his voice, "Didn't I tell you to give recruited soldiers lenient conditions?"

That officer cautiously answered, "I have. According to Marquess of Jing-An's instructions, Bei Mo citizens who become soldiers will have huge rewards and family tax would be reduced by a half..." He stiffened in horror and didn't say any

more when He Xia's eyes flickered to him.

Ever since the news of his intention to establish a new country spread, He Xia planned to gather talented individuals from every country. He wasn't as kind to these old nobles of Yun Chang as before.

Last time when Official Cui, responsible for supplying tea to the Royal House, came into report, he entered in full health. No one knew what he said, but by the time he left, he became a battered and lifeless body. The guards carried his corpse, his blood splattering onto the bluestone tiles. It frightened the officers waiting outside. Two of them fainted on the spot.

"Then what about Gui Le?" He Xia continued asking.

Another officer who often dealt with this kind of thing already guessed He Xia would ask this. He was a bit more prepared. He stepped forward, carefully replying, "After the announcement was made, there were about four hundred recruited."

Even Gui Le had so few?

He Xia's handsomely shaped eyebrows wrinkled. Back when the House of Jing-An was in its glory, with just a raise of his two arms, the number of Gui Le people willing to fight for him without fear or death was too numerous to count.

But it had become like this now...

His eyebrows held a terrible pain. He reached out, rubbing them without changing his expression. His voice seemed to soften though, "You can't be blamed. From today on, reduce the tax by a third in every place. Pass on my Order, at all costs. Regardless of whether they're soldier or general, if they do not obey according to my orders, kill on sight. As for He Su's family...give them the proper treatment of royalty by burial."

The maids beside him could see he was a bit tired, so they quietly served up hot tea for refreshment. He Xia held it in his hands. He smelled it but didn't drink any. He then asked, "Have the treasures for auspiciousness been collected already for the establishment of the new country?"

The people before him were all afraid he'd ask this. Their expressions darkened at his words.

“From the look on the face, it’s obvious you weren’t able to find a single one. Fine, I won’t ask that for now.” He Xia said, “There have been rumours everywhere recently. Something like failures surfacing as if symbolising disaster in the future?”

The two officers stood like logs. They snuck a look at each other, neither daring to say a word.

Who dared to report about the ominous incidents in the four countries while He Xia was currently putting all his ambition into building a new country? But Bei Mo, Dong Lin and Gui Le suddenly had several strange incidents.

Mud oozing blood, swallows dropping dead for no reason, statues crying... Everyone was worried enough. After these occurrences, one gossip turned to ten which then became a hundred and to even more people, scaring the world. All in all, the general opinion in establishing the new country would bring disaster.

These rumours gradually made their way to the army camps.

There were already generals in the Yun Chang army that didn’t support the establishment of the new country. Although they didn’t dare say much, their hearts were whispering otherwise. As for the prisoners of war from the other three countries, at least eight of ten didn’t approve of He Xia in the slightest.

He Xia saw they were quiet but wasn’t offended. He smiled, “Even though these jokes are ridiculous, they’re still enough to scare you. They’re just from someone messing around from the shadows. Pass on my Order, all countries are to have their forces strengthened. You pick a few talented individuals, dispatch them everywhere so they can clear things up. They can debunk all these little tricks for me.” He then lowered his head to read a few more documents before saying, “You can leave.”

The two officers hurriedly left as if granted amnesty. When they stepped out of the room, they looked at each other. Their clothes were completely soaked. When the wind blew, the cold swept right into their bones.

Dongzhuo received orders to command the Yongchang Regiment and hurried over from Yun Chang during the last few days. He had been by He Xia’s side since his early years, so his identity was very different to others. Other civil service officials or military generals had to stay in arranged living quarters, but he

entered the Royal Residence straight away after entering Gui Le.

While the two officers stepped out, Dongzhuo stepped in. He saw He Xia's eyes closed while leaning on the chair, as if getting some rest. He scanned the accumulated pile of documents on the table before whispering, "Since Master is tired, please get some rest soon."

He repeated twice, before He Xia finally shook his head. "No need." He opened his eyes, "You've been quite busy in the last two days, so go to sleep soon."

Dongzhuo agreed but stood on the spot, not moving for a long time.

He Xia noted he wasn't willing to leave and couldn't help chuckle, "You brat, you're more or less a general when you go out now. How could you be so over-sentimental? Fine, if you don't want to go, stay, since I also wanted to ask, how do you plan to control the Yongchang Regiment?"

"Shang Lu's soldier training was decent. I have gone out to check on them outside the city two times in the last two days. The soldiers were doing the drills well, suggesting their foundation is solid. It's just..." Dongzhuo was a little hesitant, "maybe because I don't have experience in commanding troops nor military qualifications, so although the officers below me are respectful on the surface, they don't approve of me as a general behind my back."

He Xia murmured, "hmm" but didn't say much.

Dongzhuo was feeling a little bit confused about this. He couldn't help ask, "In terms of mobilising troops for war, Fei Zhaoxing is obviously a man with talent. Why wasn't he given rights to command the Yongchang Regiment as well, since he did help Master get rid of Shang Lu?"

When He Xia heard the name, Fei Zhaoxing, he suddenly harrumphed. Dongzhuo's heart jolted. He hurriedly shut his mouth.

In the magnificent royal hall, the suffocating silence surged.

Dongzhuo pretty much grown up with He Xia, so his words had always been casual, without restraint. In recent years, He Xia's thoughts became more unpredictable day by day. Sometimes his expression was so cold, it seemed to fill his heart with a bitter coldness. His Master was nearing the throne closer and closer, but it felt like he became further and further away from himself. With just

a harrumph, the supreme, dignified yet murderous air of an emperor would completely swallow his audience up.

At this thought, Dongzhuo couldn't help feel a bit sad.

After a while, He Xia softened his expression. Seeing Dongzhuo stand there carefully, not daring to make the slightest sound, he beckoned to him, whispering, "There's something I want you to do. Fei Zhaoxing hasn't told me about this. He has been dealing with some dangerous men. Corruption, extortion, there's no evil he hasn't done. Find evidence of those crimes for me and take care to keep it a secret, so the news is not leaked."

Dongzhuo was stunned for a few moments.

Needless to say, his Master was planning to deal with Fei Zhaoxing. Like Master's usual actions, when he hadn't started, nothing would happen, but once he did, the chances of Fei Zhaoxing escaping were very slim.

While Dongzhuo was still alarmed, He Xia asked, "Is that clear?"

"Yes." Dongzhuo mumbled.

He Xia's gaze lightly touched his face. He suddenly asked, "Do you think I'm too heartless?"

Dongzhuo hurriedly shook his head.

He Xia's gaze was sharp as he studied him, his eyes black. Dongzhuo felt like there was absolutely nowhere to hide under his gaze, as if his thoughts were being read.

He Xia assessed him for a while before lowering his eyes. He sheepishly laughed, "Who would've thought that things would turn out like this? I'm about to establish the new country and ascend the throne to emperor. You, a reckless little thing, became the general of a huge regiment. Pingting..." He abruptly stopped his words, his handsome face revealing a hint of sadness difficult to describe.

Where was Pingting, the Pingting who stayed by my side during my early years, the Bai Pingting who once played qin for me in the old Royal Residence of Gui Le?

It was very difficult not to remember how her soaring laughter floated through the Jing-An Ducal Residence like a silver bell, pleasant to the ear, leaving glowing petals everywhere it went.

Because of that, He Xia easily found her. He pulled her from the corner of the small building, radiantly saying, "Pingting, let's go riding."

Go riding, go paint, go read, go listen to songs...

Together, to the battlefield...

He Xia stared at the candle, watching the flickering candlelight. Its brightness jumped on his slightly more gentle-looking face.

At that moment, Dongzhuo felt he was seeing the romantic Marquess of Jing-An in the Jing-An Ducal Residence from back then.

The evening breeze wafted over, causing the silk curtains on the open windows of the great hall to gracefully dance.

Dongzhuo whispered, "Master, do you think Pingting is still alive?"

"Chu Beijie left the mountains. Who else apart from Pingting can make him leave them?" At the mention of Chu Beijie, He Xia's gentleness was suddenly missing, replaced by a sharp flashing light in his eyes.

Dongzhuo thought for a bit and couldn't resist saying, "But even now, no one has seen Chu Beijie himself, not to mention Pingting. No matter what, we have to see them in person..."

"I'll kill that person if I do!" He Xia suddenly clenched his teeth, heavily thumping the table.

Dongzhuo's ears began to buzz. He was utterly stunned. It was a long time before he managed to stutter out, "Master...do you mean...Chu Beijie?"

It was very likely that Pingting was associated with Chu Beijie's departure from the mountains. Even Dongzhuo managed to roughly guess that much from He Xia's words. Now that these two unpredictable people came together before an impending battle, it really was the worst of the worst.

If Pingting really did help Chu Beijie fight Master, what could be done if those two were to meet in the future? Dongzhuo was troubled by this for a long time

but didn't dare to ask He Xia about it.

He still retained a bit of innocence from the former Jing-An Ducal Residence. He hoped to use today's great opportunity to listen to his Master's intentions and see if there was any hope for change. He didn't believe Pingting would be so heartless.

He Xia's face was very cold. He stressed each syllable, "No, I meant Pingting."

That was definitely not a joking expression.

Dongzhuo never once expected He Xia would reply so directly and firmly. His body suddenly felt cold. It felt like his heart was clawed by a cat, extremely painful and uncomfortable. He shifted slightly backward.

He Xia's expression was very fierce. He stared at the document on the table as if seeing his enemies. It was a long time before his taut expression finally relaxed, even revealing a bit of helpless melancholy. His smile was wry as he murmured, "Why would she do that? Does she not even feel a little bit sentimental?"

Under the red glow of the candle, his handsome face remained pale.

The two were silent as they faced each other, both feeling like they had nothing left to say.

He Xia waved, "Go sleep. Tomorrow still has things to come."

Dongzhuo answered, "Yes." He glumly lowered his head, retreating to the entrance.

From behind, vague and muffled sounds of He Xia's voice came.

"Dance of the skies, dream of the vast emptiness, affection is not strong..." He Xia sighed deeply as if full of thoughts, each hiding indescribable regret.

When he returned to his quarters, Dongzhuo suddenly remembered. The day of the banquet with Yaotian at the Prince Consort Residence, He Xia took advantage of the time to dance out this line with his sword.

That night, the entire courtyard was full of melting yet not melting snow.

Bei Mo's dance maids worn colourful skirts, having drums at their waist. They skilfully tapped the beats as they danced, their freshness appealing and earning

Yaotian's delight.

Both husband and wife were in an excellent mood, drinking together under the moon.

He Xia danced with his sword while Yaotian smiled.

Dance of the skies, dream of the vast emptiness.

Affection.

Is not strong.

Dongzhuo finally understood why He Xia intended to kill Fei Zhaoxing.

He would never forget the time He Xia heard of Fei Zhaoxing's advice to dispose of Yaotian. His own heart had been gently cut off by silent lightning.

Qierou.

It may be because of the messy war to see the peasants without homes and wandering around. The number of people entering the city had gradually multiplied.

"So what? There are many benefits for having many people. Excellent, excellent!" Fanlu listened to his subordinate's report, laughing carefreely.

The Governor's seemed quite refreshed these days, and it seemed his mood has gotten a lot better. His irritability from the last few days was definitely nowhere to be seen.

He crossed his legs as he chatted to the clerk for a bit until he suddenly thought of something. He instructed, "The people at my residence are all old acquaintances from the time I was still in the army. Each and every one of them can kill, and many of them don't like to deal with others. They also hate people who inquire about them. You'd better be careful, don't mess with them."

Dujing knew the Governor was a person from the army. He obediently replied, "I wouldn't dare disturb Sir's friends. Absolutely not, absolutely don't dare to."

"Heh, wouldn't expect you to." Fanlu grinned and laughed.

He knew the news of Chu Beijie hiding in his residence mustn't be leaked at all costs. Otherwise several hundreds of thousands of soldiers would immediately

come surround them. Fortunately, Chu Beijie and his men were all shrewd elites trained in the army, so it was unlikely they'd slip up. None of the subordinates in his residence were particularly clever. Only Clerk Dujing was a bit smarter and could probably suspect something.

Fanlu wasn't worried. He already told Moran he sent for a surveillance expert. The moment he became aware, the expert would immediately lash out, ending his life.

Even though he was just a governor, in the mere city of Qierou, he was the dictator. There was no one he couldn't hide. It was also likely that at least eight out of ten of the recent influx of migrants were teams of Chu Beijie's men once stationed outside the city.

While he laughed, he suddenly heard a crisp voice seemingly asking the cabinet officer outside, "Where is the Governor?"

Fanlu leapt to his feet, raising his voice, "I'm here."

Zuiju pushed the door and entered. She held a square tray in her hands. When she saw Fanlu, she smiled slightly. "So even you do things seriously sometimes." She gingerly stepped closer, gently putting the tray on the table. The tray held a bowl of steaming rice porridge.

Fanlu looked at Zuiju and then looked at the porridge. His smile came from his heart, but his mouth deliberately said, "I've already had breakfast."

Zuiju wasn't angry. She simply said, "Oh, then give it to the Clerk."

Dujing hurriedly shook it off. "I dare not to! I dare not to! Sir, I must go to deal with affairs first."

"How could you possibly dare eat my food?" Fanlu snatched the bowl, not letting go of it.

Dujing knew this was Fanlu's personal problems. It was something he should never get himself mixed into it, so he didn't. He immediately excused himself and considerately closed the door for them when leaving.

Fanlu held the bowl, sometimes saying it was too hot, other times saying the flavour was too bland. When he finished the entire bowl of porridge, he burped

in pleasure, praising Zuiju, “Ever since seeing Father-in-Law, you’ve been a lot more obedient.”

Zuiju asked, “Shall I be obedient like this in the future too?”

Fanlu nodded vigorously, “Of course, of course! That would be good!”

Zuiju said, “Teacher said I should know what’s important, not get in the way. I won’t bother with your work, so I’ll come later to accompany you.” She got up and left.

This miracle made Fanlu very delighted, but because Zuiju praised him for taking his work seriously, he couldn’t shamelessly ditch his work to follow her. He could only attentively do his work, planning to indulge himself with Zuiju for a whole day when he was finished.

When he was about to finish his work, as expected, Zuiju pushed the door open. She smiled as she looked at Fanlu, “Are you still doing well?”

Fanlu retorted, “Very well. Why wouldn’t I be?” Seeing Zuiju’s expression, his heart plummeted. His expression changed, “What did you put in the porridge?” It would’ve been better if he hadn’t said that. As he did, Zuiju abruptly got to his feet and felt most of his energy completely depleted. His two legs shook, and his entire body felt a rather itchy.

Zuiju pursed her lips to a smile, pretentiously checking his pulse at the wrist. She giggled, “Miss Bai is amazing. Even though it cannot diagnose any illness, the victim cannot detect they’ve been drugged”

Fanlu was so angry his teeth felt like they’ve been grinded to dust. He reached out to grab Zuiju, but he didn’t have enough energy so his speed was naturally quite slow. Zuiju easily dodged. Fanlu fumed, “Why did you try it on me?”

Zuiju was laughing at first, but at his question, her expression cooled down. She stared at him, her hands on her hips. “Say, why did you tell Teacher that I... that I have...slept with you?”

Fanlu was angry at first but after hearing her question and seeing her blushed, he couldn’t help sit back in his seat. He clutched to his stomach while insolently laughed.

Zuiju shot daggers at him.

When Fanlu had his fill in laughs, he said, “That’s just idle chat, so I’ll admit it. Your drugging is justified. Though, why don’t we make this idle chat become something that isn’t idle chat tonight. What’s done cannot be undone...” He had yet to finish when severe hits and punches rained.

Fanlu whined a bit, asking, “How long is this stuff effective?”

She felt a lot more comfortable after punching him a few times. She replied, “It can be long or short depending on your constitution. You don’t know how difficult it was to prepare this. I know medicine and helped at the side. The extremely diverse types of herbs made even me feel a bit dizzy. It really is amazing Miss Bai knows so much.” She then triumphantly continued, “Even silver needles can’t detect it in rice porridge. Those who eat it only feel languid and further effects, depending on the person. Some will have their limbs completely drained of strength while others will completely sleep, but no detectable symptoms are left on the body. Even Yun Chang generals can’t suspect it. See, don’t you think that’s pretty interesting?”

Fanlu rolled his eyes at her, sighing, “I know you’re only delighted because the one who got tested was me. Sigh, if this result hadn’t been the way you expected, then you would’ve murdered your husband.”

Zuiju poked her tongue out at him, “Got that right. I really am happy because of that.” Ignoring the currently miserable Fanlu due to her actions, she went toward the backyard alone.

Pingting was busily preparing various drugs in the last few days, so she hadn’t slept at all. Once they were prepared, she was barely able to stand her ground. Huo Yunan hurriedly took her pulse and wrote a few prescriptions. After Zuiju shooed away the yet to recover Fanlu, she came to accompany her for most of the night.

Pingting advised, “You’ve always been helping beside me, so you’re tired too. Get some rest soon. What am I to do if you get sick too?”

Zuiju said, “I’ll stay for a bit longer before leaving. I’ll wait until you fall asleep.”

Pingting said, “I’ll only want to talk to you if you’re here. I wouldn’t want to

sleep even more.”

At Pingting’s words, Zuiju smiled and returned to her room. Pingting leaned against her pillow for a while, gradually entering sleep. In her haze, she felt someone stroking her hair. She murmured, “You’re back?” She opened her eyes to see moonlight scattering in from the window, while Chu Beijie sat at the head of the bed. He had yet to get in his night clothes, appearing to have only just returned.

“Why is your forehead so hot?”

“Duke’s return has perfect timing. The drug has been prepared today. The drug is just as we want. We’ll prepare it again tomorrow, so we may have more doses and it will be enough for anything.”

Pingting knew he was annoyed at her for not looking after her health. She pursed her lips and smiled, “Has Duke accomplished the goal of this departure?”

“Sneaking into the enemy camp and cutting down once was enough. I didn’t use the Divine Spirit Sword this time, just a knife to prevent recognisable marks.” Chu Beijie undid the sword at his waist with one hand, placing it on the table. His expression was serious, “If I end up cornered in the future, I ought to be an assassin.”

Pingting gently replied, “I know Duke wouldn’t do such underground deals. If we have enough troops, Duke would definitely agree to decide victory against the enemy generals on the battlefield.”

Chu Beijie held her tightly, solemnly answering, “For you, I will agree to do anything. What is assassination when you’re supposed to do anything when it comes to clashing armies?”

This rang in Pingting’s ears for a bit before so she softly asked, “Any news from outside?”

Chu Beijie didn’t want to let Pingting know at first, but he couldn’t hide it now that she’d asked. He sighed, “I assigned Ruo Han and the others to create inauspicious disturbances, cause panic amongst the peasants so He Xia wouldn’t be able to immediately ascend to the throne. While this could fool others, it couldn’t fool He Xia. He sent his Order to get the elites of the army to trace them

down and somehow managed to find the trails of our people.”

Pingting softly gasped.

Chu Beijie was silent for a while, “Huacan died. Luoshang’s side is unknown. Contact has been completely cut off, so I’m afraid the odds are against us. I have immediately ordered Ruo Han to stop all actions, so he wouldn’t catch any attention again. But no matter what, thanks to these disturbances, the number of established families against the the formation of a new country has increased quite a lot.” He hesitated before continuing, “He Xia also knows not every single one of the Yun Chang generals would agree to his desire of establishing a new country, so he is eager to expand his personal troops. He has been doing major recruitment in Bei Mo and Gui Le, but not many are willing to join.”

Pingting sighed, tucking herself deep into Chu Beijie’s arms. “Master is becoming more and more unpopular.”

Gui Le’s Marquess of Jing-An of the past used to recruit numerous willing Gui Le people to fight for him without fear or death by just a raise of his two arms.

Killing the entire family of the surrendered King of Gui Le was indeed He Xia’s fatal error.

Pingting abruptly shuddered. She was calculating each error her Master made, thinking how it can be used in her planning...

Reality seemed to be mocking people, in a way that was too heartless.

Master had already returned to the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

But those tolerant, gentle days were already a thousand miles away.

Like that, who else did his heart have left to yearn for under the moonlight?

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 71

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch71

In Gui Le City, everyone in the Royal Residence was forbidden from making sound. Even footsteps were muffled.

The Marquess of Jing-An who could decide death in a single word was furious today.

Fei Zhaoxing hurriedly walked inside. Seeing He Xia's warmthless expression, he showed a sign of submission. He cautiously stood at one side, waiting for He Xia's questioning.

"You're here." He Xia looked at him, not asking about what he'd been up to recently. He pointed at his table stacked high with documents. "Look at this, even though I've repeatedly clarified that these inauspicious incidents are merely someone messing around in the shadows and all that's needed is to send troops to deal with the lurkers, these ignorant fools actually still try to hand reports to me, requesting me to not rush on establishing the new country, saying that it's God's wrath. What wrath, unless they mean the skies aren't willing for me to take the throne?"

Fei Zhaoxing knew his anger wasn't light. He quickly agreed, "Marquess of Jing-An is correct. These ignorant people don't even understand what's important to a country, so don't be too angry at them, Marquess of Jing-An. As for the establishment of the new country, following Marquess of Jing-An's intentions is good."

"I thought that at first too, but it won't work." He Xia's anger cooled down slightly. He sighed, "There's been no movement uncovered from Chu Beijie's side. I suspect those generals have enough of credit or they're afraid of Chu

Beijie, so they don't dare to put full effort into hunting them. I really want to immediately send out troops when we find Chu Beijie's location..."

He seemed to realise he had lost his composure, so he paused for a brief moment. He drank a mouthful of the served tea, calmly continuing, "There's been a lot of things going on these days. The recruiting hasn't gone well, and at first I didn't want Yun Chang to supply resources for the army, but Dong Lin, Gui Le and Bei Mo have suffered years of war. A lot of their land has been abandoned, temporarily unable to supply enough rations."

Because of the problem of forage, most of the refurbishment troops were left in Gui Le. Every part of the Yun Chang Royal Residence reminded He Xia of Yaotian, so he often felt his heart was unbearably pained and subconsciously wasn't willing to immediately return.

Of the seven Yun Chang regiments, Gui Yan's Yongxiao Regiment was annihilated at the start of the war. He Xia had used prisoners of war from the various countries to form a new Yongxiao Regiment as supplement. Fei Zhaoxing did his secret calculations. Currently, two regiments were stationed in Gui Le. One was scattered across Bei Mo and Dong Lin while the remaining three were all in Yun Chang.

The four countries had yet to settle, and the main commander was away from Yun Chang for a while. It really was a bit dangerous.

If it were the past, Fei Zhaoxing would've definitely and bluntly tell He Xia, but ever since his suspicion, he was much more reserved about everything. He stood at one side and thought about suggesting, "Chu Beijie is a scourge. Although he is currently in hiding, he mustn't be ignored. He should be hidden in Dong Lin. If one regiment can't find him, then send more people to look should be enough to find traces eventually. Why not send me, or General Cui's Ganfeng Regiment to Dong Lin, to cooperate with the hunting?"

He Xia quietened, his face unhappy as he murmured, "You probably don't know the news that just reached here this morning. Cui Linjian has been assassinated."

"Ah?"

Cui Linjian was a young general He Xia recently promoted. He was only twenty-

two, but he was very smart and worked well. He was very loyal to He Xia thanks to his promotion. His death was a major blow to He Xia, who wanted to insert his confidants in the military to gradually and completely take control of all military power.

“He was decapitated in the middle of the night in his own tent. The head was hung on the door post.”

Fei Zhaoxing asked, “Could it be Chu Beijie’s doing? We ought to immediately assign a general to take charge. The entire Ganfeng Regiment’s men lost their main commander.”

“Who do you think is best to take over?”

Of course Fei Zhaoxing wouldn’t say himself. He picked the most obvious choice to say, “It’s too difficult to find the right person last minutely. General Qing Tian’s Shuitai Regiment is closest to the Ganfeng Regiment. Why not integrate the two regiments together, temporarily all under General Qing Tian’s command?”

He Xia shook his head, his eyebrows furrowing. “Although Chu Beijie does have the skill, it may not be him. Only someone familiar with the internal structure of the Yun Chang army would choose to attack Cui Linjian. I’m afraid it might not be that simple.”

Fei Zhaoxing was intelligent too, and he immediately understood Yun Chang’s meaning. Cui Linjian wasn’t a Yun Chang resident, nor was he an aged veteran in the army. Many important generals of Yun Chang held objections in their heart towards the former commander of the Ganfeng Regiment, and Qing Tian was one of the ones who complained the most.

But who in the army could possibly dare to assassinate the commander of a regiment during this time of power struggle?

He secretly blamed himself for speaking so quickly, as if helping Qing Tian gain another regiment. He regretted it immensely and hurriedly tried to work around it, “Then should we send more troops to deal with Chu Beijie? I’m currently dealing with the tasks Marquess of Jing-An has given me, so I’m afraid I can’t leave. So why not send General Qing Tian’s Shuitai Regiment as reinforcement?”

He Xia finally nodded, "Then send him." He approached the table, lifted the pen, and wrote an Order. He added his own seal, handed it to a guard, and asked Fei Zhaoxing, "How has the matter about the crown been going?"

Fei Zhaoxing reported, "The craftsmen have been found. Two of them are from Gui Le while another decent one is from Dong Lin. Both are well-known masters of their trade and hid as war fell. Finding them was quite a task. All sorts of precious gemstones and metals have been collected. The one in the middlemost stone is planned to be the best sapphire. Currently a single useable one has been found. The crown's materials have been sorted, but the Queen's..."

"Use it for the Queen's crown first."

"Marquess of Jing-An?" Fei Zhaoxing hesitated as he asked.

"Give the gems for the Queen's crown first. You can slowly prepare the King's, so don't worry about it. Remember, the craftsmanship must be exquisite and the materials in high-quality, especially the Queen's crown."

Fei Zhaoxing looked at He Xia's expression with puzzlement. His handsome face had a faint experience, as if always having undispersed fog. He was standing right there, but he seemed very distant. He could only answer 'yes' before backing away.

When returning to his base, his subordinate, General An excitedly hurried over again, inviting him out to drink.

General An was an old veteran of the Yun Chang army. Fei Zhaoxing was much more seasoned than Dongzhuo. Even though he'd taken over the Weibei Regiment after Gui Changning's death, he spent much effort to get along and win over several generals, both on the surface and underneath. Seeing General An, Fei Zhaoxing smiled, "Drink again? General has gained a number of accomplishments, and the Marquess of Jing-An gives a lot of reward. Why not buy a large piece of land, set up a residence, and marry a few pretty women to enjoy life? That's much more interesting compared to drinking."

General An waved his hand. "I just love drinking alcohol. I don't know when I'll be finished, being a person who kills out on the battlefield. One woman is enough. If I marry more, there'll be more widows in the future." He sighed, "Women aren't any good anyway. Look at Chu Beijie; he disturbed others by

disappearing for a woman. I heard he appeared recently. Heh, I reckon that's a lie. As for our Prince Consort..." He suddenly remembered He Xia had strictly forbidden others from referring to him as the Prince Consort. He abruptly stopped.

Fei Zhaoxing's heart jumped endlessly. He smiled and asked, "What about the Prince Consort?"

General An scratched his head, "The Marquess of Jing-An is deeply in love, but it's a pity about our Princess who had such bad fortune to actually die while giving birth. If she were still alive today, then she would enjoy this endless splendor."

Fei Zhaoxing felt these words were becoming increasingly out of place. His expression changed slightly, and he pondered, "I was just worrying about the size of the Queen's crown I've been ordered to prepare recently. Perhaps the Marquess of Jing-An is going to find a new queen when he ascends the throne?"

General An was a pompous man, so he didn't notice Fei Zhaoxing's expression. His hand waved a few times, "Where can you find such a queen? Has General seen any woman around the Marquess of Jing-An? Even if he does marry again, I reckon she'll only be a concubine. That's why I say the Marquess of Jing-An was quite nice to our Princess. I heard that in Yun Chang, he ordered the Princess' grave to undergo grand renovation. Tsk tsk, those little small-hearted guys secretly attack, saying the Prince Consort killed the Princess, but I reckon that's impossible due to the feelings between husband and wife."

When Fei Zhaoxing heard these words, the tightly knotted, messy strands of confusion in his mind felt like it had been completely slapped clean by a hand from the skies. He suddenly understood everything.

He stiffened, rooted on the spot.

General An finally realised something was wrong. "General, what's wrong?"

Fei Zhaoxing dazedly replied, "I suddenly thought of something urgent, and I must go do it immediately. I'll accompany you on another day."

He hurried to an inner room and pushed close the door so all of the sky's gorgeous sun was blocked outside.

A biting cold rushed upwards from the soles of his feet.

He Xia intended to murder.

For Yaotian, He Xia wanted to take revenge for Yaotian.

No wonder, out of so many people, he picked the arrangement of the Queen's Crown as well as finding men to renovate Yaotian's grave. It felt like he just turned his head, only to realise that a huge wire overhead about to trap a big fish, him.

Remembering how he'd thought that only wealth lay in the future, he realised it was just a bubble. He Xia had already become the world's most powerful man, hence taking his, Fei Zhaoxing's, life, was nothing to matter.

Although he'd repeatedly advised He Xia to kill, he had really wholeheartedly done it for the sake of He Xia's own authority.

Now that He Xia killed Yaotian and regretted it immensely, he decided to use Fei Zhaoxing as a scapegoat to vent out his anger.

Fei Zhaoxing's cold sweat oozed downwards. He was both angry and depressed. His fist clenched until his nails dug into his flesh.

The plan with the drugs was proceeding very successfully.

Fanlu's physique was extraordinary. Zuiju hadn't used much either, so he completely recovered in two or three days. Zuiju then gave him a task, "Find a way to mix this into the food supply." She had a huge bag of the mentioned drugs in her hand.

"How do you mix it? All the food supplies are confined in sacks, unless you want me to undo each and put the drugs in? Do you think those officials in charge of supplies are fools?"

"You're the fool. No one asked you to open them." Zuiju took out a small amount to demonstrate. "Dissolve a little powder in water and pour it over the sacks. Won't the drugs then diffuse through?"

This idea was good. Such a small bowl of drugs would be utterly undetectable even when poured over. Although only the grains dampened would have the desired effect, the rice of army meals tended to be cooked sack by sack, in one

huge pot. Who wouldn't miss out on it then?

Zuiju handed Fanlu the bag, but he didn't take it. He gave her a deadpan look, "What reward do I get for helping you do this important job?"

Zuiju's expression was immovable, "It's not like only you can do this job. With such an easy task, the Duke can randomly send out someone to impersonate a patrol issued out by you to inspect the food supply. I just thought that you looked rather idle, so I helped find something for you to do."

Fanlu harrumphed unhappily a few times, but he took the bag anyway.

In the few days that followed, there were some vague news.

First, it was suspected that a plague hit the army. The army doctors didn't know what was going on exactly, so several famous doctors from the various cities outside went to check.

Later, the symptoms were diagnosed. They all said that it wasn't a plague. The soldiers were most likely unaccustomed to the climate.

"They weren't stupid either. They first suspected it was the food that was the problem, so they examined it over and over again, yet couldn't find anything at all. I've been quite cooperative too. I've immediately sent some rations of the poisoned stock from Qierou. I have even even specifically indicated that this poison was probably not able to be detected by silver needles, so dry Asteraceae grass and water should be used instead. If the water turned black, then there was poison. I think that'll muddle them for a bit longer."

Fanlu's words caused all of the people inside the room to burst into laughter.

Only Zuiju glared at him. "Why lie for no reason? They could suspect you because of that, bringing great disaster."

Pingting sat by Zuiju's side and lightly held Zuiju's hand at her words. She turned to her, quietly explaining, "There really are poisons like that. He isn't lying."

Chu Beijie also said, "We're planning to tackle this general for a bit. Letting Fanlu please him first. A bit of friendship is good."

Only then did Zuiju realised she wrongly accused Fanlu. At first she wanted to

apologise, but when she raised her head, she saw Fanlu beamingly smugly as he winked at her. Her apologetic words swallowed with a loud gulp, hurling itself right back into her stomach.

Moran asked, "What other news?"

"Lots of news, as if the heavens are helping us." Fanlu was the main source of the news about the Yun Chang internal structures and so everyone had gathered around where he sat. At the mention of army, Fanlu was even more delighted. He was very attentive as he dramatised, "First of all, the Duke of Zhen-Bei is to be praised. Assassinating Cui Linjian was done with a knife, not the Divine Spirit sword."

Chu Beijie faintly replied, "Choosing Cui Linjian was completely your merit. Without you, the current situation is impossible."

At his words, Fanlu knew Chu Beijie pretty much guessed everything about the current situation. He was only getting him to clarify the situation on his behalf so that he, "a Governor of Yun Chang" could more successfully integrate Chu Beijie's men. He couldn't help give Chu Beijie an appreciative glance as he continued to speak, "Cui Linjian's death has caused He Xia to suspect Qingtian. Because He Xia has been actively replacing veterans in the Yun Chang army with newcomers, there have been complaints everywhere from these Yun Chang veterans. Cui Linjian was currently the highest promoted amongst the young generals. Yes, he isn't a Yun Chang citizen."

Moran was listening very carefully. He asked Fanlu, "Don't tell me you have spies in Gui Le? You're very sure that He Xia is suspecting Qing Tian."

Fanlu chuckled, "How could I possibly have the skill to insert spies by He Xia's side? But it isn't hard to know. Although the Ganfeng Regiment is without a commander due to Cui Linjian's death, He Xia didn't send the nearby Qing Tian to takeover the Ganfeng Regiment. Instead he ordered him to go to Dong Lin to hunt the Duke of Zhen-Bei." He paused, glancing at Chu Beijie.

Zuiju bursted into laughter. "That Qing Tian sure is unlucky. Everyone in his regiment currently has no energy to move their limbs, and they can't find the reason for it, so it's completely impossible for them to go to Dong Lin. He Xia would certainly hate him even more, thanks to their delay of military orders."

Seeing how the others silently looked at her, she blushed slightly, “Did I say something wrong?”

Fanlu said, “It’s because you were right. We all felt very surprised.” Zuiju’s eyes widened, but she had yet to speak before Fanlu turned back to Pingting. He bowed, sighing, “As expected of Miss Bai. I admire. I admire it.”

Pingting replied, “Governor flatters me. This plan, one that’s strong by playing weak, relies heavily on location. It’s all what the Duke thought of, not Pingting’s own accomplishment.”

Fanlu shook his head, “Miss can’t put it like that. Without Miss, who else could create such a wonderful drug?”

Zuiju thought for a moment, finally understanding. The reason why Chu Beijie planned to put in drugs was to create tension between Qing Tian and He Xia. Assassination, create the drug, put it in, allow Fanlu to develop friendship with Qing Tian, had all been linked together. Zuiju spat a little, mumbling to herself, “When it comes to war, you men are really quite vigorous, to go around in a huge loop to do something.” She suddenly remembered Pingting was sitting at one side, but she wasn’t a man. She poked out her tongue, raising her head to pull a face at Pingting.

Recently, Huo Yunan was also listening to their military discussions with interest, so he had his own seat to occupy. He raised his voice, asking, “From what I see from this situation, Duke’s intention to shake the Yun Chang morale has already been achieved. Are you planning to personally go to draw out Qing Tian?”

Pingting shook her head thoughtfully. “The situation has yet to mature. The generals in the army won’t rebel so easily.”

“I too think the situation has yet to mature. Qing Tian won’t immediately betray He Xia.” Chu Beijie revealed a warm and handsome smile before changing the subject, “But time is precious, I still plan to immediately go see Qing Tian.”

“Duke?”

“If it has yet to mature, then it’s possible to let it mature a bit quicker.”

Fanlu began to feel excited. “Please bring me alone, Duke. I once stayed in the

Shuitai Regiment for a bit, so I'm quite used to them. Maybe there's something I can do to help..."

Moran immediately asked, "Are you good friends with Qing Tian?"

Fanlu chuckled, "Back then my position was very low. There was no way for me to have a chance to personally meet General Qing Tian. But spies are the greatest masters of looking at people. He doesn't know me, but I've often secretly watched him."

Without further ado, the crowd considered all things properly and immediately set down the plans.

Chu Beijie and Moran took ten elites, as well as Fanlu, immediately setting out of the city.

It was the first time Fanlu actually set off with them. Zuiju was a little bit worried, tugging at Fanlu's sleeve. She beckoned him to a corner, lowering her voice, "Do you have to go?"

"Of course," Fanlu held out his large palms, "See, my palms are dreadfully itchy."

Zuiju said, "For some reason, my heart is pounding. You have to be more careful during this outing."

Fanlu was rather sarcastic. "Heart is pounding? Geez, that's a bad omen in the army. Come, let me touch it, so it won't pound any more."

At first Zuiju was scared pale white by him but didn't expect his final words would be that. She was so angry she rolled her eyes, batting away Fanlu's outstretched claws before striding away.

Chu Beijie and the other dozen people left the city. They hurried all the way, heading straight for the grounds near the Shuitai Regiment until the sky darkened. Everyone hid in ambush outside, staring at the tiny little lights across the empty space in front.

Chu Beijie quietly whispered his arrangement. "I will go find Qing Tian directly. Moran and Fanlu, sneak into the camp and provide assistance immediately when required. If something unexpected happens inside, we will immediately fight our

way out from the east. The rest only needs to create fire, don't try to forcefully clash as creating a bit of chaos for us to escape is enough."

He instructed the approximate details in a few sentences. Each of the group were experts in their respective trades and knew how to adlib when required, so they didn't need any further instructions either.

Chu Beijie's piercing eyes were fixed on the other side. He stared into the emptiness, "Let's go." Moran and Fanlu followed him. All of them were dressed in black, including the cloth masking their faces. They were like three shadows, silently and effortlessly entering the enemy camp.

This was the location the Shuitai Regiment was stationed to for a long time. The camp wasn't made with those temporary, makeshift leather tents but yards of proper layered fences. The tents were like little buildings of an undecorated residence. The brightly lit centremost house was Qing Tian's residence.

Chu Beijie hid back and forth to escape the small patrol squads, heading straight for the central, commander's tent. Moran coordinated with him for a while, so he too quietly managed to near the central tent.

Fanlu had been in the Shuitai Regiment before and was more familiar with it than Chu Beijie and Moran. He was extraordinarily courageous. When he passed by a small room, he glimpsed to check if anyone was inside before entering and finding a set of the Shuitai Regiment's uniform. He dressed in it and swaggered out.

The patrol rule for whistle calls has remained unchanged for many years hence eavesdropping for that night's password would be enough. Fanlu stood in a dark corner, listening to the small squads interact.

"Peace to the Princess."

"Great fortune to Yun Chang."

Fanlu thought, the Princess has already died. This Qing Tian sure had a conscience, not completely forgetting his former Master. Since the night's password was obtained, there was no longer a need to hide. Fanlu stepped out from the shadows, taking the opportunity to look around. For anyone he encountered who asked anything, he replied with the same password. Hearing

how he had the Yun Chang accent, his behaviour being obviously military in origin, and not to mention he had the right password, no one suspected him.

Chu Beijie should have already snuck to where Qing Tian was. Fanlu kept on heading to the centre, planning to let Chu Beijie see how cool he was. He had yet to reach the innermost when Fanlu abruptly stopped. He turned to the room on his left. He remembered there used to be nothing in that building in the past, but the number of guards stationed had noticeably increased. There was a flag stuck on the door. When it fluttered in the wind, the character “Xia” seemed to dance in the wind.

As a spy, his gaze was even sharper than a thief’s. He instantly knew there was something strange hidden inside.

He hid himself, assessing the place for a long time. He suddenly revealed a sly smile, “Fortunately I passed by here.” He turned and walked, taking advantage of the night and heading for the sound of water. He muttered, “I just remembered there was a river here.” He was never someone to sit around, a born spy, so he always explored every nook and cranny of the topography around him. The Shuitai Regiment’s annual station here was certainly no exception.

Fanlu once sneaked to this river and knew its undercurrent would pass by that house.

He slipped into the water like a loach, not giving a single splash. When in the water, his breathing slowed. He swam continuously. After a while, it appeared there was space overhead. He floated up, his head right on the stone ceiling. There was only a small gap between the ceiling and the surface of the water, but it was enough to reveal his mouth and nose, letting him breathe temporarily.

Fanlu took in another deep breath, diving back down. This time he swam even further than before. The water was dark, so he could only fumble out his way. His lungs began to heat up slightly when he suddenly bumped into something. Fanlu reached out to touch it, immediately realising that it was an iron lever. He yelped in alarm.

There had never been an iron lever here. Fanlu remembered what Zuiju said to him before he left and his heart sighed. Was this really the way his life was to be?

He particularly regretted for being so conceited which caused him to die so

unjustly.

His chest felt like it had been engulfed by fire, but Fanlu didn't dare open his mouth. He understood that opening his mouth at that moment was not only futile but would undoubtedly send him to his death. He held onto the iron lever, desperately shaking it.

The pain from lacking air boiled in him. His mind was a mess. He could only use all his energy to struggle.

At that moment, the iron lever on his hand shook slightly. Although it was just a bit, Fanlu's spirits were lifted. He shook it even more forcefully, using his feet to hit it underwater.

Almost all of the air in Fanlu's lungs was used up, so his strength declined steadily. In his haze, he felt like he heard Zuiju's voice. Fanlu shuddered before continuing his struggle

When he was about to despair, the iron lever moved again. It moved much further than before, its foundations appearing to have loosened. Fanlu hurriedly leaned forwards, so his entire face was past the lever.

The skies are really helping me!

Already near-death, Fanlu struggled to squeeze himself past. He didn't care about the multiple scrapes and thrashed to get to the surface of the water. He didn't expect a thick stone ceiling there. There wasn't a chance to even float.

Fanlu's heart plummeted. With a hand groping the rock overhead, he did everything to swim forwards. He swam for a bit. Only after all his energy seemed to have been depleted did he feel a coolness on his palm. Fanlu was delighted. He violently kicked the bottom, and his face popped out on the surface. Huge amounts of precious air greeted him.

Fanlu panted in huge gulps, scattering water droplets as he climbed out. He always brought matches with him, carefully wrapped in oil paper. He lit a fire and looked around him, muttering darkly, "Damn that Tian bastard, he actually made a water dungeon and almost caused me to drown."

It seemed Fanlu wasn't the only person who discovered this water route. This place obviously underwent some renovation for the underground water to be

used. No wonder iron bars had been installed to prevent human interaction.

Perhaps it was because the blacksmith who forged the iron bars thought they were going to be underwater, unseen, that he worked on it sloppily. The iron bars were easy to loosen, but it was this that saved Fanlu's life.

Fanlu remembered he was in enemy territory and extinguished the flame. He carefully made his way inside where the walls flickered with the light of an oil lamp. The light was about as small as a soybean, but it was enough to cast the entire room in a hazy light.

The two guarding soldiers were lying asleep on the table, snoring. A pile of bottles were by their feet. With so many guards outside, the chances of the inside being as secure were ten thousand to one. Who would expect a certain fiend would come out from the water?

Fanlu approached those two. He viciously struck the back of their heads for them to properly faint.

"Why don't I go see who needs to be locked up so securely?"

He looked inside the prison where a tall figured man sat. His eyes were shining in the dark, and his expression was piercing.

Fanlu asked across the prison door, "Hey, who are you?"

The man had bandages wrapped around his shoulders and legs. He coldly noted how Fanlu appeared, wearing a dripping wet military Yun Chang army uniform and knocking out the guards. But he showed no surprise, he just assessed Fanlu a bit. "And who are you?"

He had been locked up for a long time. His hair and beard were a mess and his face was largely obscured so even Fanlu couldn't recognise him. But when he spoke, his words had the superior momentum that belonged to senior generals. Fanlu was stunned for a few moments and looked more closely at his features, feeling they were increasingly familiar as he looked. His expression suddenly revealed shock, "You are Bei Mo's Ze Yin!"

All of the Bei Mo citizens thought Ze Yin was killed by He Xia after his challenge. Who would possibly expect he was secretly imprisoned inside the Shuitai Regiment's campsite?

“I’ve seen you before. You’re Bei Mo’s Main General, Ze Yin.”

Ze Yin didn’t make a sound. He knew Fanlu was a person from the Yun Chang army at first sight, and his heart was alerted him to be on his guard for it may be He Xia’s trick. He couldn’t speak; he didn’t speak.

“Why are you locked up here? How long have you been in here?”

Fanlu asked a few questions in succession, but Ze Yin didn’t answer. He knew Ze Yin was suspicious of him and secretly thought, I risked my life to get here, but you don’t appreciate it. I ain’t happy. His expression cooled, “Do you know who I am?”

Ze Yin heard his tone and became increasingly certain that he was someone who’d been in the Yun Chang army for many years. This person was most likely a spy sent by He Xia. He frowned, “Say what you want. If you don’t, then get out.”

“I’m yer son Ze Qing’s godfather!” He had been listening to Zuiju about what Pingting had told to her so he obviously knew about Yangfeng and Ze Qing.

His words had yet to fall before Ze Qing abruptly leapt to his feet in the prison room. He stiffly walked a few steps, his pace suddenly increasing a bit more. His voice was solemn, “A lot of people know my son is Ze Qing. Don’t you dare try to fool me.”

Fanlu harrumphed loudly, not bothering to answer. He took the keys off the two guards and opened the prison door. He mumbled to himself, “Poor godson, I wanted to save your real father’s life, but he says he doesn’t want to see you. He just wants to wait and die here. When I think of how you and your mother will be bullied since you don’t have a father or your godfather by your side, it’s quite pitiful.”

Ze Yin was slightly startled.

Being imprisoned for so long, he had no news of his wife and son. It felt like his heart was clawed out when he thought of how they would have lost his protection, causing them to be bullied in all sorts of ways by others.

Fanlu didn’t look at him. He just stretched. “I’m going to go. The people outside are still waiting for me. You can escape under the water and follow me if you want. It’s up to you.” He turned and headed to where he came from.

Ze Yin was a little hesitant, but he immediately caught up. He made up his mind to not see Yangfeng after leaving this place nor leak a single word to this person. Even if this was an enemy trick, it will do no good.

Outside the camp, two shadows quietly sneaked back.

When the people waiting outside saw them, they instantly sighed in relief.

Chu Beijie and Moran hid themselves, asking the others, “Has Fanlu returned?”

Everyone shook their heads. Moran’s heart sank a bit. He lowered his voice, “I’ll go in again.”

“No need. He knows this place better than us. wait a bit.”

The people uneasily waited for a while, mentally scolding Fanlu in every brutal way possible. Even Chu Beijie’s eyebrows were locked in frown.

How were they to explain to Zuiju if Fanlu got trapped inside? Forget about rescuing. If they broke in to rescue him, all their plans would be destroyed.

While they were still extremely worried, Fanlu finally appeared. His clothes were wet. Because he lurked out, quite a lot of dust stuck to his body. In the black night, his clothes looked very gray-yellow.

Once seeing Chu Beijie, Fanlu didn’t bother explaining where he went. He began by asking, “Has Duke seen Qing Tian?”

Chu Beijie planned to scold him a bit, but after consideration, he decided now wasn’t the time. He lightly replied, “When I went, he was reading an urgent order from He Xia. He was scolded for disobeying military orders in not leading his troops immediately to Dong Lin.”

When Moran saw Fanlu had returned, his worries about Zuiju were put to rest. He revealed a faint smile and purposefully relaxed the atmosphere, “To be honest, just the fact that Qing Tian didn’t immediately call his men to capture the Duke when they met is already enough to determine Qing Tian’s mind has been a little shaken.”

“Qing Tian is really unfortunate. His relationship with He Xia is getting increasingly worse. Firstly, he is suspected of killing Cui Linjian. Secondly, he’s

suspected of lying about sick soldiers so that he could disregard the military orders, and now I've helped him get another really important third reason."

Chu Beijie understood there was a deeper meaning underneath. "What reason can be so important?"

Fanlu chuckled, "Isn't it quite disastrous if he loses an important prisoner He Xia ordered to keep in secret custody? The first two reasons are only He Xia's suspicions, but he can't do anything about a great general like Qing Tian on the surface for mere suspicions. But losing an important prisoner is something He Xia would certainly use as an excuse to deal with him. Qing Tian will perhaps have to invest in us then."

Moran asked, "Who is this important prisoner? Why does he matter?"

"Does Bei Mo's Main General Ze Yin matter?"

The crowd was utterly shocked.

"Where is he?"

Fanlu looked rather lazy and actually yawned. He pointed at the hillside behind, "I hid him and came to talk to the Duke first. You two were once enemies in the battlefield, but don't fight the moment you see each other. I exchanged him for my life."

Chu Beijie was delighted. He softly roared, and the dozen people began charging toward the hillside behind them.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 72

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But Qing Tian's situation was even more dire than expected.

Ever since He Xia gained large amounts of power, his attitude to these minor Yun Chang generals who worked tirelessly behind the scenes gradually changed. Although his rewards didn't stop, the feeling rusted away. Qing Tian was quite intelligent himself, so there was no way he couldn't tell He Xia was putting all his energy into raising his own men. Promoting Cui Linjian as the main commander of the Ganfeng Regiment was a perfect example.

This meant that if he were to establish a new country in the future, it would not be centred around Yun Chang.

It seemed to mean that all citizens from four countries would be equal.

To the people of Yun Chang, this wasn't good.

When Chu Beijie secretly visited late that night, Qing Tian was intensely distressed about He Xia. Qing Tian didn't really know why Chu Beijie seemed to appear like a heavenly god before his eyes or why he didn't call for his bodyguards either.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, who had been missing for so long, seemed to become a dazzling folk myth. He Xia's arch enemy suddenly, unbelievably appeared before his very eyes and was trying to persuade him. This was something Qing Tian had never thought possible.

Chu Beijie's words couldn't be said to be without truth.

"General Qing has personally witnessed the methods He Xia used to deal with

the Gui family. The Gui family was ruined in his hands as well as the Royal House of Yun Chang. There's no guarantee General Qing will survive and not be ruined in his hands either. As a son of a prominent family, does General Qing not want to the future generations to survive?"

Qing Tian had solemnly replied, "Don't you dare try to sow discord. I haven't done anything disrespectful to the Marquess of Jing-An, so how could he do anything to me?"

Chu Beijie saw his indignance. His smile became even deeper. "Then what did Yaotian do that was disrespectful to him?"

Qing Tian's body shook slightly, "The Princess died while giving birth."

He thought Chu Beijie would continue sowing discord, but he didn't expect Chu Beijie would sigh softly. "If that's what General Qing thinks, then what can I do? Heroic men should always die a valiant death on the battlefield, so how could Gui Changning possibly rest in peace after dying such a death?"

He was wearing clothes suited for lurking in the night, but he gave others a just and rightful feeling. In comparison to the romantic He Xia, this man had a bit more heroic courage.

Qing Tian watched him leave, his hand pressed against the hilt of his sword.

Chu Beijie visited him late at night, yet did not attack him. If this different treatment to Cui Linjian was made known to He Xia, it was certain his suspicions towards him would increase.

After hesitating for a few moments, he finally decided not to summon his bodyguards inside.

The thought of the current suspicion between major generals was really quite chilling.

General Qing Tian stiffly considered his way through the night. Dawn had yet to brighten the sky when a bodyguard stumbled inside to report, "General, not good, the prisoner in the water dungeon has escaped!"

"What?" The sleepless Qing Tian abruptly sat out of bed, his eyes as wide as bells. He urged, "How did he escape? Has anyone been sent to catch him?"

“He seems to have escaped by going underneath the water. The metal bars were loosened, and no one knows how he managed to open the prison door. General, should we immediately report to the Marquess of Jing-An?”

Qing Tian was dazed for a few moments before solemnly answering, “Not a whisper about this is to be leaked. All of you must guard your mouths. I have some plans of my own.” He dismissed the bodyguard and got up to change. Sitting or standing didn’t feel right; he could only blindly worry. When on an outing, he didn’t care how much blood he lost, but the work due to his rank during a war at standstill was always a pain.

Sigh, when it rains, it pours indeed.

The Royal Residence of Gui Le.

On the grand hall, Dongzhuo was currently in the middle of his report to He Xia. “The spies have found Ruo Han’s traces in Bei Mo. He appears to still be recruiting in secret.”

“Ruo Han?” He Xia waved his hands dismissively, “Just let him slowly recruit. I want to get all the rebels together anyway, so it’s easy to get rid of them in one go. Don’t worry, I have my own plans to deal with Ruo Han.”

He Xia had yet to learn of Ze Yin’s rescue.

He had numerous benefits of keeping Ze Yin alive back then. This Main General’s effect on the Bei Mo army was equivalent to Chu Beijie’s effect on Dong Lin, so he kept him alive to prevent the remnants of Bei Mo rebelling in the future.

How could the Bei Mo rebel forces not lose their morale when they charge their sharp swords pressed forwards and suddenly find their most beloved, respected Main General Ze Yin, thought to be long dead, appear before them?

Important things had to be hoarded until used at an important time. This was the one value He Xia always upheld when setting down his strategies.

“Qing Tian’s report has just arrived. He said he didn’t disobey military orders. It is because his troops caught a strange illness recently, and every soldier has been feeling weak in their limbs. Their body itches...”

“Hmph,” He Xia sneered, “So shameful, to say such a ludicrous excuse. Since it’s an illness, has the name of it been confirmed?”

Dongzhuo was earnest in personality and honestly replied, “Qing Tian doesn’t seem to mean it as an excuse. I’ve been getting other news at the same time, all saying that several of Yun Chang’s army camps have gotten the same symptoms. We worried if it was the plague, but fortunately the soldiers weren’t too ill, so no one died.”

At these words, He Xia’s attention was caught, “Has the food supplies been examined?”

“Yes, they have been examined. There’s no problem with them at all. It seems the problem isn’t with the food.”

He Xia coldly smiled, “It’s even more suspicious if the tests came out negative. Have you forgotten who is on Chu Beijie’s side? It’s not the problem of the food supplies of a single army camp but several all over the country. How dare they sneak in my Yun Chang’s territory.”

Dongzhuo knew he meant Pingting. His heart was startled. He frowned, “It’s not easy to tamper with military food supplies that way, so I think it’s impossible. Unless they have enough skill to sneak into Zuxi and tamper over there?”

The other officials in the main hall, especially the military ones, all quietly nodded in agreement.

He Xia knew Dongzhuo was right and thought for a bit. His expression changed slightly. He raised his voice, “Bring the map!” After pushing open the map and carefully studying it, He Xia’s hand pointed at the map. He exclaimed, “They really are good thinkers to think of something like this.”

The crowd was below the. They craned their necks as they could not see where on earth He Xia was pointing on the map. They then heard He Xia suddenly ask, “Who is the Governor of Qierou right now?”

Someone hurriedly checked the list of officials, reporting, “It’s Fanlu.”

He Xia heard this and knew he was one of Gui Changqing’s men, confirming his suspicions even more. He rolled up the map and solemnly said, “I bet Chu Beijie is currently in Yun Chang. Immediately make preparations to leave, I will

personally lead troops back to Yun Chang.”

His forte was leading troops and never once be defeated. When he mentioned he was going to lead troops, his expression was very firm and resolute. Even if the people below him were doubtful, they didn’t dare advise him. They all answered with a loud ‘yes’.

The generals all knew there was a battle to fight, meaning there was accomplishment to gain so they approved of it even more. They began to feel very excited.

He Xia turned to Fei Zhaoxing, “Zhaoxing, I’m worried about Gui Le. You deal with things appropriately, so I’ll leave you here to take care of things here. There was originally a group of elite soldiers to govern the city here, and they will now be allocated to you. As for the Weibei Regiment and the other people, come with me on this expedition.”

Fei Zhaoxing’s heart froze.

In a few words, He Xia managed to strip him away of his military power and even transferred the several generals he’d finally managed to win the hearts of. Didn’t it mean almost certain death if He Xia left a secret Order to deal with him while he left?

Fei Zhaoxing secretly clenched his fist, but his expression didn’t change at all. “Yes.”

He Xia watched him use the seal and transfer the rights to command the Weibei Regiment right there and then. He nodded, “Everyone can go prepare. We shall leave in three hours from the rear city gates.”

The crowd thundered ‘yes’ and immediately scattered.

Fei Zhaoxing left the Royal Residence gates alone. He suddenly heard someone yell from behind. “General Fei, please wait.”

He turned to see He Xia’s chief bodyguard hurrying towards him with around four guards. He smiled as he spoke to Fei Zhaoxing, “The Marquess of Jing-An has instructed to let general take command of the soldiers guarding the city. I have been ordered to bring you to meet them.”

His expression was very natural, thinking there would be no trouble. He didn't expect Fei Zhaoxing to be cleverer than the average person nor that he had long been suspicious of He Xia.

Fei Zhaoxing's gaze didn't move. He just saw the guards behind submissively bow. There was no way he didn't understand if he made the slightest movement, these guards would pull out their swords. He chuckled secretly in his heart as it seemed He Xia had already commanded his subordinates to capture him when no one was around and deal with him in the future. Fei Zhaoxing revealed a pleasant smile, "Fine, thank you brothers for taking the time to accompany me."

Each of them got on their own horses and just turned the corner when Fei Zhaoxing unsheathed his sword, stabbing the chief of the guards right in the heart.

There was no way the other person expected Fei Zhaoxing to be the first one to attack. He cried in pain before falling off his horse.

Fei Zhaoxing gathered his reigns, turned his horse, and ran. The remaining people watched him leave before suddenly jolted awake, cursing as they gave chase. He Xia happened to be setting his Order at that moment with his men outside the gates, preparing to leave so the gates were wide open. Fei Zhaoxing's military uniform were bounded off of him. The soldiers guarding the city hurriedly kowtowed to him. They had yet to stand back up before Fei Zhaoxing and his horse disappeared like the wind.

He Xia received the news and was instantly furious, "How could you not complete such an easy task?"

But the army immediately departed anyway. He Xia left a lieutenant to pursue Fei Zhaoxing and deal with Gui Le's affairs by himself. The lieutenant dressed into his military uniform and rushed inside the gates.

In Qierou City, the echoes of laughter thanks to Ze Yin's safe return had yet to end.

Chu Beijie and Ze Yin were enemies on the battlefield once, but for Yangfeng and Pingting, as well as the chaos under the skies, they finally became people of the same path.

“Sigh, I just want to see my son a little.”

“Me too.”

The two famous generals couldn't help moan and groan at the mention of their sons.

Ze Yin said, “You're a bit better off than me, having Miss Bai at your side. It's a pity Yangfeng and Qing'er still don't know whether I'm safe right now, and I don't know what terrible, upset state they are in thanks to that.”

Pingting happened to come in from outside. She stifled her laughter with a hand, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Yangfeng has been upset for a long time, so when she sees you, her heart will rejoice.”

Chu Beijie was an experienced man and understood Ze Yin's feelings better. He softly comforted, “It can't be helped. Dong Lin's military power is pathetically little, so it's better not to let the Yun Chang army notice them. To ensure confidentiality, we can only try not to pass on messages to them.”

At this mention, Fanlu held Zuiju as he came in. At the sight of Chu Beijie, he asked, “Duke, when will you go see Qing Tian again?”

“He won't be able to interact with He Xia at all thanks to my escape, so he is definitely feeling restless. When the fish has had enough of the heat in the frypan, it will definitely jump out onto the table.” Ze Yin laughed.

Chu Beijie also had such plans and simply called everyone over. “Without further ado, we will go see Qing Tian again.” This time, Moran and Ze Yin were to go, while Fanlu would stay to guard Qierou.

Fanlu was a bit frustrated. He only knocked out two mere soldiers last time, not killing anyone. His hands itched, but he didn't expect that he wouldn't be able to go this time.

Zuiju stroked his chest. “Very good, very good. The monkey is locked up in his cage.” She narrowed her eyes at Fanlu.

Zuiju was very happy Chu Beijie didn't let Fanlu go on a risky adventure.

The crowd departed like last time. When sending him off, Pingting said to Chu Beijie, “Hurry back, Duke. I keep on feeling a little jumpy.”

Chu Beijie smiled gently, "When we're apart, my heart always feels a bit uneasy. Don't worry, I will be back soon." He softly kissed her cheek, and Pingting closed her eyes, accepting it submissively.

Fanlu was on one side, smiling as he said to Zuiju, "Look at her, so obedient. Last time when I left, I said I'll help touch your wound..." He had yet to finish, when he cried out in pain, obviously punched by Zuiju.

This expedition was different from last time as they left early in the morning. When they arrived at the Shuitai Regiment camp, it was still morning. Chu Beijie and the other generals were undoubtedly masters of sneaking and hiding. They would hide wherever there was brick. This place had many more hiding spots compared to normal camps. Qing Tian's courtyard was very quiet, and no one was seen, appearing to have all been dismissed by Qing Tian.

Chu Beijie studied the situation and had confidence more or less. He didn't bother hiding his figure and simply strode inside.

Qing Tian was inside his room, frowning. When a light flashed in the corners of his eyes, he hurriedly turned to see Chu Beijie standing in front of him who calmly smiled, "Has General Qing made his decision? I have returned to hear the decision."

Qing Tian solemnly replied, "Was Ze Yin rescued by the Duke of Zhen-Bei?"

Chu Beijie smiled and didn't answer.

"Do you know with just the raise of my voice, you will die a meaningless death?" Qing Tian lowered his voice.

Although Chu Beijie was still smiling, his expression sharpened considerably. Their gazes locked into each other for a long time until he answered with a question, "Then why does General Qing not raise his voice?"

His gestures had the royal air that pressed down others.

Qing Tian stared at him for a long time before softening to a deep sigh, "I've thought a lot, these days..."

There were two opened letters on the table. He picked one of them and handed it to Chu Beijie. "I am, in the end, a person of the army, therefore I hate

rebels the most. I originally made up my mind that if Duke came again, no matter what, I would make Duke stay behind even at the cost of my life. What importance is life when it comes to loyalty? Look at this Duke, if it hadn't been for this letter that arrived just now, I'm afraid the sight of Duke would have me summon other people."

Chu Beijie took it, lowering his head to read the inscription. The three characters for Fei Zhaoxing's name were on it. They were scribbled, apparently hastily written.

"Isn't this Fei Zhaoxing one of He Xia's trusted generals?"

"Correct, this has Fei Zhaoxing's seal, so it can't be faked." Qing Tian nodded, his expression suddenly revealing an unspeakably indignant heartache. "In this letter, he describes how He Xia...how He Xia harmed our Yun Chang's Princess." His voice was a little hoarse.

Chu Beijie suddenly understood.

His heart secretly wondered how this was such a clever coincidence, so he read the letter carefully. Although Fei Zhaoxing was currently on the run, his narrative was not cluttered. He went into depth about how He Xia imprisoned Yaotian and forced Yaotian to her death. Every scene was so saturated in description that even an outsider like himself felt that it was unbearable to read, not to mention a general who had been loyal to the Yun Chang Royal House for several years.

If Fei Zhaoxing wrote this letter around ten times, handed it to all of Yun Chang's generals, then He Xia would be very unfavoured. But why did Fei Zhaoxing suddenly decide to betray He Xia to even such a violent method?

Qingtian waited until he was finished with Fei Zhaoxing's letter before he suddenly asking, "Did Duke of Zhen-Bei come out from Qierou?"

At the mention of Qierou, even the experienced Chu Beijie couldn't help jolt. He urged, "How does General Qing know?"

Qing Tian picked up the other letter on the table and handed it to him, "There's another letter which arrived around the same time as Fei Zhaoxing's. He Xia wants me to immediately depart, lead troops to surround Qierou. Hmph, I just want to lead troops to confront him and beat him to pieces!"

Chu Beijie almost snatched the letter off his hands. He hurriedly skimmed a few lines, his expression changing immensely. “Dammit!”

He Xia was leading troops to siege Qierou, yet Chu Beijie left Pingting and the others in Qierou.

Chu Beijie’s mind was a mess. His actions were quiet. He asked Qing Tian, “Can General lead the Shuitai Regiment against He Xia? What will you do if your subordinates report you’re rebelling?”

Qing Tian vaguely knew something was going to happen. He bluntly said, “The Shuitai Regiment are all sons of Yun Chang. As long as I read through Fei Zhaoxing’s letter, I can guarantee not one will want to follow He Xia. To be honest, ever since Dong Lin, Bei Mo and Gui Le were conquered, my Yun Chang’s brothers have been getting increasingly worthless.”

“Good!” Chu Beijie said, “Then please General, immediately come with me to Qierou and stop He Xia.”

“Of course I want to immediately go to Qierou to fight against He Xia, but hatefully my men are suffering from a strange illness. All of the soldiers have been feeling weak in the limbs and can’t even climb on their horses.”

Because Chu Beijie needed Qing Tian’s cooperation, he had long asked Pingting to make preparations. He hurriedly said, “Don’t worry about that, I have brought the antidotes with me. Dissolve it in water and give a small amount for everyone to drink. They will immediately feel better.” He patted the bag on his back.

Qing Tian’s mouth dropped opened, realisation dawning.

“There’s one more thing.” Qingtian frowned. “It’s not that I underestimate Duke’s power, but He Xia isn’t a normal person. He’s leading two regiments over, so my Shuitai Regiment only has half of his power. I’m afraid we will be no opponent for them. Also, when the two armies clash, it’ll be very difficult to determine friend or foe as the opponent also has many sons of Yun Chang.”

Chu Beijie thought of Pingting and was very anxious. His hand pressed on the hilt of the Divine Spirit sword was drenched in cold sweat, but he knew Qing Tian was right. He thought for a few moments, asking Qing Tian, “Apart from the Ganfeng Regiment, is the Yongxiao Regiment also nearby?”

“Correct, the Yongxiao Regiment was completely annihilated by Dong Lin and is now made up of remnants of soldiers from the fallen countries.”

“Where do most of them come from?”

Qing Tian praised how quickly he thought. He replied, “People from Gui Le are few, most of them are prisoners of war from Bei Mo and Dong Lin. He Xia is afraid they may not be convinced so deliberately put them in preferential treatment. Their supplies is twice the amount of normal soldiers. Although their commander, Chang Liang, is from Yun Chang, he is very loyal to He Xia. Even if he reads Fei Zhaoxing’s letter, he may not hate He Xia as much as me.”

Chu Beijie laughed for a few moments. “So what’s there to be afraid of?” He walked to the entrance, lowering his voice, “Come over here, all of you.”

The several generals hiding in ambush heard his summon and knew the big matter was complete. They all went inside.

Time was urgent. Chu Beijie rapidly arranged, “He Xia is currently taking two regiments to attack Qierou and can arrive at any time. General Qing Tian and I will immediately lead the Shuitai Regiment back to Qierou. The Yongxiao Regiment is approximately thirty miles in the north. Their commander is Chang Liang, a confidant of He Xia, but most of the soldiers are Dong Lin and Bei Mo people. Ze Yin and Moran, I want you two to go. Regardless of whatever things you do, kill Chang Liang and get the Yongxiao Regiment for me.”

Everyone was surprised from hearing of He Xia attacking Qierou. Ze Yin. Moran knew they held great responsibility and didn’t dare neglect it in the slightest. They received Chu Beijie’s orders and turned away.

Chu Beijie took a deep breath and looked at Qing Tian, “General Qing, let us go avenge Princess Yaotian.”

Pingting, you have to safely wait until I return.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 73

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The sudden rumbling in the air travelled into Fanlu's ears.

"Strange," Fanlu looked up, staring at the small black spot in the sky, "This kind of circling is typically a result of breeding falcons. Why would it suddenly fly over us?"

Pingting followed his gaze and looked up. She clearly saw the rather restless falcon high up in the sky and frowned, "When the Duke came to Qierou, he arranged a small squad to stay behind at the border between Yun Chang and Bei Mo to keep an eye out on enemy movement. Their captain owned an old falcon. Could that be his? Why did he fly here?" Hearing the falcon's unceasing caws, it seemed that there was something urgent. She hurried into the room and grabbed the falcon bell Chu Beijie left behind. She shook it, and the sound of bells were heard continuously under the eagle.

This bell was one the falcon's owner gave to Chu Beijie specifically to pass on messages. When the falcon heard the bell sound, it would know it had found the right place. With another long caw, it plummeted down.

Fanlu's eyes were quick. He snatched the bell from Pingting's hand and threw it onto the stone table. That falcon was already in sight and considerably sheathed its wings. It firmly stopped on the stone table, grasping tightly onto the bell.

There was a small piece of cloth wrapped near the bell. Fanlu reached out to take it.

Zuiju was standing at a distance, urging, "Be careful you don't get pecked at!"

Her words had yet to fall when the cloth was already in Fanlu's hands. Fanlu smiled, "This falcon is more considerate than you. It won't randomly peck at other people. Let me see the news it brings." He opened the cloth, his expression suddenly changing.

Fanlu had interacted with him for a long time, but this was the first time she'd seen such an ugly expression on his face. She hurriedly asked, "What's wrong?"

"He Xia has already led two regiments to attack Qierou."

"Ah!" Zuiju cried in panic, hurriedly muffling her mouth with her hand. She looked at Pingting.

At Fanlu's words, Pingting's face was drained of colour. She too, abruptly stood up, her body shaking to and fro for a bit. She asked, "Which two regiments? When will they arrive in Qierou?"

Fanlu bitterly smiled, "How do I know? The cloth only says that much. But looking at this sloppy writing, the situation must be very urgent."

Zuiju urged, "He Xia's arrival will be terrible. Has Miss got any good plans? Oh gosh, why did the Duke choose today to leave?"

Pingting shook her head, "It's good that he left today." Her voice trailed off in the end.

Fanlu gravely said, "You must immediately leave. I will withstand here and try to detain He Xia as long as possible."

His expression showed the colour of rare generosity.

Zuiju was in extreme panic and almost cried out.

Pingting thought for a few moments, abruptly raising her head. She made her choice right there, "Complete withdrawal immediately. If he is rushing towards Qierou, then he must know everything already. His sword will come down on you without waiting for a single word."

Huo Yunan and the others hurriedly arrived. Hearing Pingting's words, Huo Yunan asked, "It can't be that dire, could it? The falcon is much faster than the army, so there should still be time. We can wait until the Duke returns, so the planning can be more assured."

Pingting resolutely shook her head. “No, we must immediately pull out of Qierou. Fanlu, you think of a way to reach out to all of our people in the city. No need to assemble, we must immediately leave the city and flee in the direction of the Shuitai Regiment.”

Fanlu frowned, “We still don’t know whether Qing Tian’s side is going well. What if he refuses to join us and leads his troops to support He Xia. If we bump into the Shuitai Regiment on the way, won’t that be falling right into our deaths?”

Pingting sighed, “He Xia is leading two whole regiments here, while we only have a mere thousand. If the Duke can’t successfully win the Shuitai Regiment in time, our deaths are certain. If the Shuitai Regiment joins the Duke and we can meet up with them, then we still have a chance at living.”

She understood the situation well, and her few words were enough to portray a thorough analysis. The people immediately saw the situation before them was very grim, and their hearts sank. They didn’t even bother packing up their luggage. They were ready to leave immediately.

Fanlu summoned several of his residence’s cabinet officers. He gave each of them a large amount of silver coins, affably instructing, “Today, I have a task for you to complete. Each of you are to write ten announcements and post them in conspicuous places throughout the city. Complete this in half an hour, and I will then reward more silver to each of you.”

These cabinet officers never once held so much silver in their hands. They felt almost disorientated by their good fortune and bowed deeply. “What does Sir want us to announce? We will definitely write it beautifully.”

Fanlu’s eyebrows droop, “What rubbish! Who told you to write it beautifully? Quick, it must be done quick! On them, write the words—Hurry! Scram, go east! Just those four words and don’t ask what it means. Just do as I’ve instructed. Listen clearly, it must be completed in half an hour!”

Once his cabinet officers were shooed away, he hurriedly went out the back door. Zuiju and the others had brought the horses from the best stables. When she saw Fanlu, she immediately tossed some reins at him. Fanlu got on the horse and raised his voice, “Let’s go!”

The sound of hooves instantly thundered. The group of people rushed towards the city gates. The market was not active today, so the city gates closed earlier than usual. When Fanlu got to the foot of the city gates, he raised his head and shouted, "Open the gates! Hurry up and open the gates for me!"

When the city guards saw their governor yelling at them to open the gates, they immediately panicked and opened it. At that moment, the effect of the announcements of the cabinet officers seemed to kick in as many more people streamed out from inside the city on horses. These people were all Chu Beijie's subordinates who snuck into Qierou, lying in wait. When the city gates opened, more than one hundred people had already materialised.

The city gates opened with a clack, revealing a gap that only allowed one person to open. Fanlu's horse went out first but when he was just about to bolt outside, he was greeted by a sharp arrow breaking the wind. Fanlu's head tilted to one side, the arrow flying past his face. With a thwack, it lodged itself on the gates.

Zuiju said, "Not good, they're already here. Hurry up and close the door. Maybe we might be able to get some time."

"No." Pingting calmly said, "That was a hastily shot arrow, as they cannot fully eat us. While they're still in the middle of their encirclement, we must go out fast. Fortunately, we are a bit faster than He Xia." She smiled slightly.

At such a critical moment, her smile was even brighter than a shooting star.

Seeing her like that, everyone's worries were unknowingly put to rest, their courage becoming stronger.

There had always been several thick shields of the soldiers guarding the city and Fanlu picked one up. He raised his voice, "Let's charge!"

His limbs jolted as he bolted once more.

There were more arrows flying this time. They came in waves but as they were hastily done, they weren't like the rows of strong arrows filling the sky on the battlefield. This meant Pingting was right, and Fanlu was secretly delighted since they were only tiny squads that arrived. He raised his shield, blocking off the arrows one by one. By then, the city gates was fully opened, and the people

behind Fanlu followed suite, getting a thick shield to protect their body. Those who didn't have shields hid behind those who did and small battle arrays were formed, tightly surrounding Pingting, Zuiju and Huo Yunan, as they collectively fought their way out.

They frantically crossed the huge empty space in front and could already see their enemies. They seemed to reach the outskirts of Qierou city, only amounting to one hundred men or so. They didn't have any more people than Pingting and the others had. Most of them were archers anyhow.

Fanlu shouted, threw away his thick sword, and pulled out his long sword from his waist. He started stabbing the moment he withdrew his weapon. The people behind him had also arrived. All of them were elites Chu Beijie carefully chose so all of sudden the glints of swords appeared. War began.

Fanlu's swordsmanship wasn't particularly good, but he was very fast and his opponents weren't particularly good swordsman either. There were several continuous screams before a few enemies tumbled off their horses, bloodsoaked.

Pingting was afraid he'd be hurt and urged, "Fanlu, don't try to fight. Run!"

Fanlu knew her good intentions, but he knew that despite the archers being cowards up close, if they ran, it wouldn't be funny when they shoot from behind. He shouted, "You go run, I'll butcher these people before catching up."

He just finished dealing with an enemy who flung away.

Wuuu!!

The sound of a horn began to vibrate. Although it was low and somewhat far away, it seemed to be right next to everyone's ear, its vibration directly jolting into their hearts.

Pingting paled and said, "Damn! The army has arrived! Scram!"

Everyone knew He Xia had arrived, and their hearts went cold. About ninety percent of these early squads were killed. They gathered their reigns and bolted for the east. Pingting brought the whip down to reach full speed. She then had time to look back, seeing a thick dust rolling in the distance behind them. Tens of thousands of soldiers were treading through the earth towards them.

“Kill!”

The battle cries were truly earth shattering. They were catching up to them from behind.

Master, Master had caught up...

No, it was He Xia.

The He Xia who killed Yaotian. The He Xia who killed the King of Bei Mo. The He Xia who killed the Royal House of Gui Le.

The earth was about to be pierced by the thudding.

The wind howled, and the sand lunged. The waves of raining burst out with successive whooshes, causing the several powerful men tightly protecting around Pingting to fall off their horses.

Zuiju cried in panic.

Pingting shouted, “Don’t look! Run forwards!” She fiercely slapped Zuiju’s horse.

Every time the rain of arrows fell, there were always a number of guards falling down. Every drop of blood that was lost became the way to survival for the remaining people.

The horses that were struck screamed and hung around the corpse of their dead master. They were too frightened to gallop on and would eventually fall under the never-ending array of arrows.

The horn’s rumble seemed to extend from the ends of the world, tearing at the people’s heart and lungs.

The arrows behind them fell like pouring rain, and the condition was brutally fierce. Only a dozen people remained to guard Pingting, compared to the hundred at the beginning. They have yet to reach the small hill before their eyes.

But it seemed like the hooves that came from hell, getting closer and closer towards them.

Fresh blood constantly splattered near Pingting as the guards were struck by the sharp arrows. The hot liquid would draw numerous beautiful arcs in the air.

Why?

Marquess of Jing-An, why?

How many souls have you buried between heaven and earth? Where is your gentleness, your romanticness, and your carefree smile of the past buried?

For what reason are you seizing these blood-filled mountains and rivers?

The wind stung at her eyes. The warm blood and apathetic world mixed into a strangely beautiful landscape. Pingting was in the midst of it, letting her tears mix into her sight.

Bei Mo, Dong Lin, Gui Le, Yun Chang...

He Su, Gui Changqing, Princess Yaotian...

How much fresh blood was fed to this country, to give birth to such breathtaking mountains and rivers?

“Ah...” A muffled sound came from behind again.

The sound of a person falling was heard, another passionate man to forever remain on this patch of land.

It was only a while before only four or five people remained behind Pingting.

Huo Yunan was the oldest, so Zuiju arranged the best horse for him. He didn't fall behind the whole way. When Zuiju saw her Teacher was at the front, she was more at ease.

Fanlu was protecting Zuiju and Huo Yunan at first, but was terribly afraid Pingting would be harmed this time. He had fell beside Pingting from the front, murmuring, “I'll protect you.”

Pingting shook her head, “Protect Zuiju.” Fanlu gave her look and Pingting raised her hand, whipping down on Fanlu's left arm. She viciously said, “Protect Zuiju!”

At such a delay, the pursuing soldiers behind them got even closer. It felt like they were the tiny prey of crazed wolves.

They suddenly heard a gasp from Zuiju. The horse she was on had been struck. It painfully treaded forward a bit before abruptly rearing up. Zuiju didn't hold on

tightly enough and slid right off the horse's back. She didn't land though for Fanlu had already rushed forwards and gathered her in his arms.

Several arrows continuously came and Fanlu protected Zuiju with one hand while the other waved around his sword, knocking away the arrows heading towards Zuiju. He suddenly felt an immense pain on his back and knew he had been hit. He was afraid Zuiju would worry, so he clenched his teeth and didn't make a sound of pain. He simply surged forwards again.

At that moment, the final guard protecting Pingting fell off his horse.

The situation was hopeless.

The pursuers from behind were gradually getting closer, and the one at the very front was He Xia in his red robe. The desperately escaping squad had been in formation, but his archers mowed them down, leaving a meagre number of survivors.

When the final guard fell, a familiar slender figure suddenly jumped into the corners of his eyes.

At that very moment, He Xia's heart felt like it was tumbling.

Tumbling rapidly at high frequency, at violent amplitudes.

His mother carried in a young girl, smiling as she treaded through the snow.

"Look, what a liable baby girl. Her fate must be connected to the House of Jing-An."

"Xia'er, do you know what is fate?"

No.

No!

What fate? Where was the House of Jing-An?

Where had the Marquess of Jing-An gone too?

He suddenly came back to his sense, only to realise that only an instant had passed. But the raining arrows weren't there as the archers have stopped, waiting for his next command. "Why aren't you shooting, who told you to stop?" He Xia thundered in anger.

He grabbed a large bow from one of his guards and clipped the bow onto the string, aiming at the front.

One of the people beside him pounced forwards, yelling, "Stop!" But He Xia was too fast and the arrow spun out of his hands once loosened. The loud sound of an arrow piercing the wind was heard.

The sharp arrowhead sliced the air, crossing the dampened bloody ground between the two forces, carrying the light sound of the wind with it.

The arrow left its string.

He shot it; he personally shot it.

He Xia watched that arrow fly forward, and although it was a short moment, time seemed to stop there. The fingers that shot the arrow felt numb. He felt a sort of emptiness like they didn't belong to him. It felt like it wasn't his heart either, but an ocean that could not accomodate his desolation that would severely hurt his limbs.

"For the last few years, we studied and played together, even learned how to fight and deal with horses together."

"But I'm only an older brother to you, and you're only a younger sister to me."

"Back then, who said they wanted to find the best possible husband or else they would rather never marry and die a long death?"

But, it couldn't be Chu Beijie...

Why, why did it have to be Chu Beijie?

That arrow directly flew towards Pingting's back. Due to not having enough strength, it had already been weakened considerably by the time it reached her. Zuiju happened to be able to see it due to being in Fanlu's arms. She was almost scared soulless. She hoarsely shouted, "Duck!"

Pingting heard this and ducked forward without hesitation. A cold arrow roared past her back.

She too, broke into cold sweat.

He Xia saw Pingting hadn't been hit from afar. His heart slowed a bit, followed

by intense rage. He brutally whipped down on Dongzhuo, yelling, “How dare you!”

“Master, that’s Pingting! That’s Pingting!” Dongzhuo pounced forwards, only hugging his thigh hanging on the girth. He promptly burst into tears.

He Xia raised his whip but lost some of his will to bring it back then. He looked up and saw Pingting and the others had pulled some distance away from the army again. He Xia’s foot twitched, kicking Dongzhuo aside. His voice was very cold, “I’ll punish you when I get back.” He unsheathed his sword, “Don’t shoot, just continue chasing! Catch them alive!”

The army thundered ‘yes’ as the earth-shattering sound of hooves began to rumble again.

Pingting and the others had no strength to run on. No matter how much they brought down their whips, their horses gradually slowed down. The thundering battle cries behind them were pressing on. The crowd could only grit their teeth, only hoping to get to the top of the hill.

Just as they reached the foot of the hill, Pingting’s horse neighed in pain. The horse before her knelt down. Pingting fell to the ground, rolling twice. She raised her head, the dust from the ground she disturbed billowed in front of her. In that haze of yellow dust, there was a very familiar face.

He Xia, the Marquess of Jing-An, the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, the tyrant who poisoned the four countries.

Her Master...

The once handsome, romantic person of even more unripe brilliance, now had a pair of pained eyes.

A lonely kind of pain, unable to find a way out of its suffering.

It was a kind of endlessly suffering pain.

Pingting was caught off guard by her tumble, but now she met the pain in the eyes of the man she had grown up with.

Just a simple raise of her head was enough to startle her.

It seemed that everything was nothing but simple. This way of concluding such

chaotic times was just about right.

At that thought, Pingting couldn't help faintly smile at him.

Ever since Pingting fell off her horse, He Xia's eyes never left her. When he saw her smile, it felt like he was captured by magic. It caused all of the noisy battle screams around him to stop, dissipating it to clouds in the breeze.

He Xia stopped his horse.

As his horse stopped, the army behind him all stopped one by one. After a while, all of the horses and men silenced. Although they were splashing blood and their battle cries filled the sky, they were surprisingly quiet all of the sudden.

The entire world silenced.

Is that you?

Is the person before me the person I know?

Or have we forgotten what we used to look like?

Perhaps there was a hint of breeze between them, striding across the space between He Xia and Pingting's gaze. It was like the autumn leavings falling onto the surface of the water, creating tiny circular ripples.

At this very short moment, sharp shouts pierced the quiet world.

"Pingting!" The deep, reassuring calls hid conquering confidence that rushed straight into everyone's eardrums.

A single man and horse suddenly appeared at the top of the hillside. He seemed like the incarnate of a god. Before anyone else could react, he rushed towards Pingting at lightning speed.

Those sharp features had the power and influence to pressure others.

His black cloak fluttered in the wind like a pair of wings flying in the breeze behind him.

Chu Beijie arrived.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei arrived.

He Xia's reaction was fast. At the sight of Chu Beijie, he slapped down on his

horse towards Pingting. He unsheathed his sword but it had yet to reach Pingting when a bright white light flashed before his eyes. Chu Beijie's Divine Spirit silently flickered forward. He Xia hurriedly brought back his own sword to block.

Clang!

The two peerlessly precious swords clashed, almost causing sparks to flicker. At that moment, tens of thousands of flags with the characters for "Shuitai" from another place began to rise. Numerous soldiers and generals surged out from the other side of the hill like the head of the tide of a flood.

Qing Tian rode directly under the commander's flag. His eyes held hot tears as he drew his sword and yelled, "My brothers, follow me! He Xia killed the Princess!"

"He Xia killed the Princess!"

"Avenge the Princess! Kill!"

"Kill! Kill!"

The thousands of recovered elites shouted like angry beasts as they charged downwards. The two sides then hit each other like two surging floods, gradually integrating into a mass of red flesh and blood.

"Kill! Avenge! Avenge for the Princess!"

"He Xia killed the Princess!"

"The Princess!"

"Princess Yaotian!"

When He Xia saw the Shuitai Regiment appear behind Chu Beijie, he knew that it wasn't good. He secretly cursed himself for not doing enough and not dealing with Qing Tian earlier. But it was already no use regretting at this stage as Chu Beijie's Divine Spirit sword was like a shadow, piercing straight forward. When Chu Beijie saw Pingting on the ground, he became distressed and desperately fought. He Xia struggled to block several parries, causing several clangs, but he didn't move even one step backward.

The soldiers around were in a mess, all desperately fighting.

In the glints of the swords, it was already impossible to distinguish anything.

This was the first time these two people confronted the other on the battlefield. The successive blows left their sword arms numbed. They couldn't help pant as they studied each other, secretly sighing to themselves, No wonder he's a famous general. It's no exaggeration.

He Xia dodged a blow, smiling, "Duke of Zhen-Bei is skilled, to move one of my regiments. But I have two regiments here and so our numbers are twicfold. Why would you think you'll win?"

Chu Beijie didn't drop his guard either. His sword sliced horizontally which skimmed past He Xia's right shoulder. His face seemed rather relaxed. He smiled as he answered with a question instead, "Does Marquess of Jing-An even have any soldiers? Of these tens of thousands of warriors, how many would be willing to give up their lives for you?"

This remark stabbed right at the wound in He Xia's heart. He heard the Shuitai Regiment yell out Yaotian's name and his heart began to feel waves of stinging pain, not to mention Chu Beijie was now ridiculing him about it. He scowled and said, "Take this." His sword sprang out, but it had yet to reach Chu Beijie when it suddenly changed direction, directly heading towards Pingting who had fell to one side.

"How dare you!" Chu Beijie fumed, flying towards to protect her.

The corners of He Xia's mouth rose into a faint smile as his sword turned again, this time heading towards Chu Beijie's throat. Chu Beijie suddenly saw the sword appear before his eyes, but he wasn't afraid. His Divine Spirit sword, although late, went in to stab He Xia's swordhand like lightning. Even if He Xia managed to stab him, he would lose his right hand. There was no way He Xia would accept that, so he rapidly pulled his sword away.

The two people rallied. Although it all happened in a blink of the eye, their lives were at stake hence they were panting. He Xia came from afar, so he had much less time to physically rest compared to Chu Beijie. If he couldn't think of a plan, there was no way he would win.

He knew Chu Beijie cared about Pingting. If she was in trouble, he would disregard his own safety to protect her. He Xia therefore aimed at this fatal

weakness and tried to attack Pingting.

Chu Beijie didn't have many days of long distance travel, so he was in his peak state. He could protect Pingting in the chaotic battlefield, and his imposing manner was as steady as a mountain.

He Xia blocked a few more times and began to show some fatigue. Chu Beijie felt like he was winning, causing him to slacken a bit. He didn't expect He Xia to coldly smile and suddenly pounce forwards, kicking Chu Beijie hard in the shin. His left hand rummaged a bit and stealthily pulled out a gleaming knife, striking towards Pingting who was behind Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie was dealing with the sword in his right hand when something flashed in the corners of his eyes, causing him to abruptly realise the knife in He Xia's left hand. It was already too late to stop it as he urgently yelled, "Pingting!"

His heart sank.

Pingting had stayed behind Chu Beijie protectively and didn't see the situation of his and He Xia's parry. She happened to be craning her head too look when the knife blade appeared before her eyes. Her eyes followed the knife, looked up that hand, and looked right into the depths of He Xia's eyes. Her expression was transparent and clear, no resentment at all.

A piece of He Xia's heart felt like it was ripped off all of a sudden, causing his hands to unwittingly be slow. His expression was first lonely but then the twisted look of pain recovered.

"Master!" Pingting's cry passed into his ear.

He Xia moved away a few steps and looked down to see himself. There was already a patch of fresh blood on his shoulders and chest. Only then did the severe pain began to spread.

Chu Beijie strode forwards until a figure beside them suddenly pounced forwards, blocking his way and started hacking. Chu Beijie readily blocked with his sword and was about to deal with this enemy in one go when Pingting suddenly rushed forwards to hug his arm, "No! Don't kill Dongzhuo!"

Chu Beijie glanced at him and vaguely remembered the little brat that escaped from his Ducal Residence back then. He now wore the clothing of a general. He

looked back at He Xia before getting back on his horse and heading into the fighting crowd.

He Xia endured the pain, riding away from Chu Beijie. He shouted, "Assemble! Listen to my orders, assemble in the west!"

It was He Xia's mistake to not expect Chu Beijie to suddenly lead troops out, but He Xia had lots more military power than him. As long as they assembled and organised themselves a bit, it wasn't hard to abolish the Shuitai Regiment.

Waves of pain swept from his chest and shoulder.

He Xia's men were uncomfortably fighting until they heard He Xia's orders. They passed on the message, "Assemble, west, in the west!"

They all collected themselves in the west.

The Shuitai Regiment had only recently recovered, not to mention they had two enemies to every one of them, so it was already a bit difficult for them to continue.

The two opposing troops gradually split into two flanks again.

Chu Beijie took advantage of this break to pull Pingting onto the horse. He hugged her, asking, "Are you hurt?"

Pingting seemed both hurt and not, but she shook her head anyway. She suddenly asked, "Is he hurt badly?"

Because He Xia had almost hurt Pingting, Chu Beijie hated He Xia so much he really wanted to hack him into thousands of pieces, but when he realised Pingting's expression held a bit of sadness, he could only vaguely answer, "I don't know. I hope he's hurt rather badly."

Qing Tian had also fought until he was soaked in blood. When he saw He Xia's men had assembled again, he knew the situation wasn't good. He hurriedly galloped out of the soldiers, asking Chu Beijie, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, what do we do? I'm afraid our troops won't last."

The corners of Chu Beijie's mouths lifted ever so slightly. He had yet to speak when the sound of the horn came again. This time, it came from the west. Each of the seven regiments of Yun Chang had their own specific kind of horn.

Qingtian quietly listened, his eyebrows rising in delight, "It's the Yongxiao Regiment!"

He Xia also listened to the sound of the horn and was utterly shocked. "The Yongxiao Regiment?" He knew this regiment was mostly made up of people from Dong Lin and Bei Mo, impossible to use against Chu Beijie. That was why he didn't order them to help out on the siege of Qierou. Arriving when not summoned was certainly not good news.

In the west, smoke billowed.

He vaguely made out the shapes of fluttering flags, and soldiers gushing out from the dense forest in the west like a colony of ants. Ze Yin was in high spirits. He was riding at the very front, leading the others out. From far away, he shouted, "He Xia, do you still remember me, Ze Yin?"

When Ze Yin said this, the Bei Mo soldiers in the Yongxiao Regiment broke into thundering cheers.

Who was still willing to be He Xia's prisoner of war now that the general they likened to god appeared?

He Xia only just realised Ze Yin had escaped from his palm.

He Xia's generals were all in panic, and they had their heads turned to him, waiting for his orders. He Xia's expression wasn't alarmed at all. He was so calm and rippleless as he sat on the horse. From the distance, he seemed like he had become a stone statue.

Moran rode up beside Ze Yin, raising his voice, "Soldiers, today, General Ze Yin is here, and the Duke of Zhen-Bei is on the other side. Don't let go of He Xia!"

When the Dong Lin prisoners of war heard the Duke of Zhen-Bei's name, they were so crazily delighted that they shook the long spears as if their lives depended on it.

The earth thundered.

By this time, both sides had about the same military force. The Yongxiao Regiment and Shuitai Regiment respectively took the west and east of He Xia's troops. The south was Qierou City, leaving only the north unobstructed. The

enemy had three famous generals, Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, Bei Mo's Ze Yin, Yun Chang's Qing Tian, and each of them were true warriors as well. On their side however, their only commander, the Marquess of Jing-An, was already been injured by Chu Beijie.

By then, even those who believed in He Xia the most couldn't help feel a bit of fear.

He Xia's hand clenched on the reins. Although his face was pale, his expression was surprisingly calm as his hand held his sword.

The lieutenant beside him lowered his voice, "Shall we kill and charge our way out?"

"Kill and charge?" At these words, He Xia's eyes rolled a little. He laughed faintly, "Look north."

The lieutenant turned to the northern direction. In the distance, he could see unusual movement. The soldiers were already in panic, but when they saw even more flags, they were immediately scared out of their wits. When the newcomers came a bit closer, the soldiers could see the hugest flag bore the words 'Ting Army'.

It appeared that while Ruo Han was hiding in Bei Mo, he received the news about He Xia leading his troops back to his country a bit quicker than Chu Beijie and the others. He knew the situation wasn't good and hurriedly led several thousands of men in the Ting army to rescue. They didn't rest at all in the last few days and nights, finally arriving at this moment.

And as a result, He Xia's army were suddenly surrounded, nowhere to run away.

Everyone looked scared.

The lieutenant urged, "Please make orders, Marquess of Jing-An. I'm afraid it won't be good if we're too late!"

It seemed that He Xia didn't hear him. He continued gazing at the fluttering flag in the distance. He mumbled, "Ting army...Ting army...so it was called Ting army." He was extremely intelligent and knew who had decided the name from at his first guess, as well as where it came from. Thinking of how he didn't

actually slice down on Pingting in the end, his mouth revealed a very joyful smile. He then felt like the torn wounds in his heart became real, bringing a terrible pain. The injury Chu Beijie gave with just one slice of his sword could never be forcibly suppressed again.

He Xia slowly raised a hand to clutch onto his chest wound. A surge of hotness gushed through his fingertips.

Thud!

The Marquess of Jing-An, who conquered the four countries and was at the peak of his life, fell off his horse.

“Master! Master!” Dongzhuo violently pounced out from the crowd, kneeling by He Xia’s side.

He had always been at one side, worrying about He Xia. He was afraid he would make He Xia angry again, causing his injury to worsen, so he didn’t dare to come closer until now.

When he saw He Xia, he realised that all of the blood that covered him was his, his breathing already in whisps. Although Dongzhuo hought an increasingly sense of unfamiliarity to He Xia, he never once expected to see him in such a state.

“Master? Master!” He called a few times, but when He Xia didn’t answer, Dongzhuo burst into pained tears.

With his tears, everyone knew the situation was hopeless.

Qierou City was behind them. They were surrounded by the other three directions. Not to mention, what were the odds when Chu Beijie was leading?

One person threw down the sword in their hand as a second followed suite.

The sounds of military swords falling onto the ground continued one after the other. Soon, all of He Xia’s men released their hold on their swords.

Who would want to die, when they could live?

Chu Beijie, with Pingting, slowly rode over. They were followed by Qing Tian, the other generals, and soldiers. The surrendered soldiers automatically parted for them to pass through like a wide boat cutting through the surface of the

water.

Pingting saw He Xia lying on the ground, covered in blood. Her eyes wavered a bit. She struggled to dismount before creeping forward. Chu Beijie was afraid He Xia wasn't dead yet, planning to harm her all of sudden. His eyes were locked onto her figure.

Dongzhuo was weeping in grief. When he saw a pair of embroidered shoes covered in dust, he looked up, tears in his eyes.

Pingting whispered, "Let me see, okay?"

Dongzhuo hesitated for a long time before finally going to one side.

Pingting slowly knelt down beside He Xia.

Under the blood of the setting sun, everything about reality seemed so cruel.

Her familiar face, ears, nose, mouth, hands that well-versed in appreciating the swordsmanship of Jing-An, and her familiar person was all quietly fading.

"Don't move, just stand here. I'll draw for you, it's going to be pretty."

That was the first thing He Xia had ever said to her.

Why did such a beautiful brush write such a desolate story?

Dear widely-acclaimed Marquess of Jing-An, the Marquess of Jing-An who almost became the master of the four countries, do you not feel any regret at all?

Like me, I regret the disappearance of innocent lives. I regret the blood that has flowed freely. I regret that I haven't clutched tightly enough to every little bit of invaluable happiness I once held.

"Master? Master?" Pingting stroked He Xia's face.

His handsome face, although dipped in blood, was still so pale.

He Xia's mouth moved slightly. He slowly opened his eyes, but they were unfocused. He seemed to feel Pingting's gentle hand stroking his cheek and managed to pull a faint smile, "You're here?"

Just these two words were already enough to bring Pingting's tears down like rain. She choked in reply, "I'm here, Master."

It seemed He Xia couldn't see anything. He just had blank eyes open. His breath paused a bit before he quietly replied, "Why are you calling me Master?" His voice was exceptionally gentle.

Pingting stiffened slightly.

He Xia's smile grew even more, as if using his entire life to smile. He suddenly spoke again, "Princess, Princess, look. I've brought the Queen's crown I promised..."

The Queen's Crown, I promised you the Queen's Crown. I have gotten the best craftsmen in the world, found the best jewels to create the Queen's Crown for my wife.

Look, I have already gotten the four countries and finally know what its greatest use is for. That is, to win one of your faint and reserved smiles, like that one you gifted to me when you lifted the bead curtain.

I will sword dance for you, pin flowers in your hair for you.

I remember your waterfall-like hair, alluring as if enveloped by clouds of mists.

I remember you liked me praising your slender hands, so beautiful and flawless.

My wife, you will be the noblest woman in the world so from thereon no one will every dare bully you again.

I won't ever let you cry again in that tiny, dark room.

"The Queen's Crown, The Queen's Crown..." He Xia softly mumbled.

His blood-stained hands trembled, trying to pull out the Queen's Crown that didn't exist from his sleeves. He struggled for a long time, still unable to summon the strength to reach inside.

Pingting knelt by one side, tightly holding onto his hand. It felt like if she let go, she would never be able to catch his life from being swept away by the wind.

He Xia's empty eyes were shining with joy.

His lips still had the former elegant shape of the past, but it was just too pale, no hint of red. He struggled, gasping, "Princess, the Queen's Crown...the Queen's

Crown...” He hesitated for a moment, his breath catching up when his eyes suddenly widened, and he raised his voice, asking, “Do you see it? See it?”

Pingting tightly covered her mouth with one hand, trying to hold back her tears. Her other hand held his rather cold hand. She choked out, “I see, I see it.”

He Xia deeply sighed in relief, his handsome face revealing a small smile. That was the gentle Marquess of Jing-An’s smile in the past, like a spring breeze.

He had used all of his remaining strength and struggled free of Pingting’s hand, slowly raising his hand. It seemed that he wanted to stroke the Princess’s eyes, but when he reached out only halfway, he no longer had any energy to continue.

He Xia reached out, putting the last trace of his strength into his trembling fingertips.

It felt like the distance between his fingertips and Yaotian’s gentle face was so far apart. He was willing to spend his entire lifetime to touch the other side.

But for him, his lifetime had already come to an end.

His fingertips shook and struggled for a long while before finally slumping down, limp.

Pingting was still kneeling. When He Xia closed his eyes for the final time, the final string she tucked away in the very depths of her heart felt like it had been gently broken by the sound of wind.

Dead. Master had died.

He was no longer the Marquess of Jing-An, no longer a famous general, no longer the demon king who’d poisoned the four countries. He was simply He Xia.

The He Xia who’d fallen in love with Yaotian, and the He Xia who had died while thinking of his wife.

Wealth and glory, life and death, power and fame, had nothing to do with him.

All sorts of past memories hurled towards her, but in the blink of an eye, everything seemed so empty and only thick darkness was left before her.

In the darkness, she felt like she saw He Xia’s piercing expression again.

His expression had once been bright, one that held laughter but then it turned

into a pair of pained eyes. Yet in the final moment when his sight was lost, during that moment when he tried to grope for that nonexistent Queen's Crown, happiness was mixed into them.

Her Master, at the very last moment before his death, knew his most beloved woman had once belonged to him, loved him.

It turned out he wasn't always lonely. His flower-like wife, the one who was also the master of Yun Chang, the one who secretly ordered his death, once accompanied him. She had had once listen qin, watched dances, and sung to him once.

When he got everything, when he lost everything, when he used his life to pay the price, he finally came to understand.

What part of those sweet words of tenderness, those gentle expressions, that joy and delight that could make his heart flutter were fake?

The fireworks cleared.

The past.

Pingting was exhausted from her erosive grief and felt her entire body go limp.

She fell into a warm embrace.

That was Chu Beijie's embrace.

Whenever, wherever, it would always make her heart feel at ease—

That embrace.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 74

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch74: Finale

The Marquess of Jing-An's fame was short-lived, his defeat at a small city disappeared along with the conventional monarchies.

Yun Chang had already lost their Royal House Bei Mo and Gui Le were no different. The scattered troops had no leader, and after many years of war, the peasants were eager to live peaceful and harmonious lives.

The unification was already set in stone. What everyone needed was a king that the entire world recognised.

Who else was more qualified other than the Duke of Zhen-Bei to take on this important job?

What He Xia had spent his lifetime on, in the end, only became the achievement of his one and only rival.

“Knife-knife!”

“Sword!”

“Knife-knife!”

“Sword!” Ze Qing scratched his head helplessly, correcting Changxiao for the hundredth time.

Changxiao argued back for the hundredth time too. “Knife-knife!”

Ze Qing turned around and begged, “Godfather, Godfather, hurry and tell Changxiao this is a precious sword, not a knife.”

“You little fool. If he likes saying it's a knife, then let him say it's a knife. After all, names are created by people.” Fanlu's voice was loud as he lifted the curtain,

swaggering inside with Zuiju. “Main General Ze Yin, I’m here today to drink a very important cup of tea.”

Zuiju narrowed her eyes at him, “Forget it, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“What do I have to be ashamed about? I’m a saviour.”

“What kind of saviour would force others to get their son to be his godson?”

Fanlu harrumphed, “What’s wrong with being my grandson? That Ze Qing kid sure has a great deal.”

Zuiju frowned, “Why does he have a great deal?”

“Isn’t getting a beautiful flower-like godmother for no reason a great deal?” This was something Zuiju couldn’t retort back at all.

The two kids watched amusedly as they bickered. Ze Yin was at one side, smiling as he watched.

Because of Ze Yin’s rescue, Yangfeng was exceptionally grateful to Fanlu and long discussed about getting Ze Qing to acknowledge him as his godfather. When she heard Fanlu had arrived, she immediately hurried to greet him and happened to hear Fanlu’s last words. She stood by the door, laughing softly, “Yes, that child Ze Qing really has got a great deal.”

At her words, everyone laughed.

Although Fanlu was a bit strange, he was on good terms with everyone. He took his acknowledgement in being a godfather as an official matter. He sent official invitations with a bit of a fanfare to several friends. When noon came, everyone all came through the door. Ruo Han was first to arrive, followed by Moran and Luo Shang and the others. In the end, even Chu Beijie turned up.

After He Xia’s death, everyone was busy dealing with the collapsed lifestyles of the countries. This was the first time they’d seen each other for a while hence after the ceremony was finished, they naturally didn’t disband immediately.

Fanlu obtained a few pots of good alcohol and opened all of them, allowing the scent of alcohol to escape into every corner.

When there was good alcohol, the place was naturally lively. Everyone had

come from different places and began to chat, inevitably reaching the topic of He Xia. Huo Yunan drank a few sips of alcohol, suddenly sighing, “That situation was so difficult back then. Who would’ve thought He Xia would charge towards a mere Qierou? We were really, really lucky.”

Ze Yin asked, “Elder Doctor, why were we lucky?”

“If the Shuitai Regiment and Yongtai Regient didn’t immediately follow the Duke’s uprising, wouldn’t that be terrible?”

Fanlu waved dismissively. “Sometimes three inches of snow aren’t done in just a single day of cold. Father-in-Law, war is always about the heart and mind. Although He Xia looked like he had great power, without a loyal morale in his troops, the seeds to defeat were actually and already be planted.

His words were justified. Ruo Han and the others all knew what war was like, and they all nodded to themselves.

Huo Yunan’s train of thought was much slower. “But back then at Qierou, it really was very dangerous. Look, two regiments were against two. Our side only had a few more thousand worth from the Ting army. That place was Yun Chang territory, and if the people nearby heard the Yun Chang army was locked in battle with another army, wouldn’t it have been terrible if the Ganfeng Regiment hurried over?”

Moran respectfully replied, “Elderly Doctor, the Gangfeng Regiment was different to the Shuitai and Yongxiao Regiments. They weren’t given the antidotes from the Duke, so their limbs were still strengthless. They couldn’t’ve rushed over.”

Ze Yin calmly added, “Even if they did rush over, I’m afraid they wouldn’t help He Xia either. Most of the Ganfeng Regiment is also Yun Chang men. If they knew He Xia killed Yaotian, they would’ve definitely been furious.”

Yangfeng reminded them, “You shouldn’t call the Duke, ‘the Duke’, but the Emperor in the future.”

Chu Beijie laughed, “If I can’t talk to you when I become the Emperor in the future, I might as well not be the Emperor.” He added honestly, “Back then, all I promised Pingting was to give her a cosy and peaceful home.”

“If you don’t properly manage with all your heart, how could the world possibly be at peace?”

Chu Beijie chuckled, suddenly thinking of something, “How is the Jing-An Ducal Residence right now?”

Everyone was quite concerned about this matter. Ruo Han’s subordinates were in charge of this, so they all turned to Ruo Han.

Ruo Han spoke, “It’s been going well. The peasants still have respect towards the House of Jing-An. It’s just that He Xia...Well anyways, Emperor has ordered the Jing-An Ducal Residence is to be rebuilt, so that it can be used as an academy for the peasants’ children. Many of the peasants have taken the initiative to help. Not only are they willing to do it voluntarily, they’re even donating their own money and grain as well as their private collections of books. That kid, Dongzhuo, hasn’t said anything at all but he does things very well so management is clear and logical.”

Chu Beijie said, “Pingting is very worried about him. I’m currently wondering whether or not to wait until the matter of the Jing-An Ducal Residence has been resolved, but send another Order, so he can be summoned into the Royal Residence for Pingting to see him.”

Ruo Han thought for a bit and frowned. “He handed me a form, indicating that he wanted to stay in the Jing-An Ducal Residence because he would like to guard the graves of He Xia and He Xia’s ancestors. And, when the Jing-An Ducal Residence is rebuilt and the academy opened, he would still like to stay in the academy to help the children of the peasants. But if he is decreed to come, he will definitely come.”

Chu Beijie shook his head. “No need to force him. Just let him stay there. Pingting will be a bit more relieved if the Jing-An Ducal Residence affairs are left to him.”

After the people scattered in the sweet haze of alcohol, Chu Beijie came to retrieve Changxiao who had been left playing there. Yangfeng sent him all the way to the door, quietly asking, “Is Pingting better?”

Chu Beijie’s face darkened a bit, “It’s a sickness of the heart, the hardest to heal. I’m afraid it’ll take a long time.”

Yangfeng sighed, "Being distraught is inevitable since she grew up with He Xia."

Chu Beijie knew that and sighed too, "Don't worry, I'll look after her properly."

He carried Changxiao back to the Royal Residence, seeing Pingting in the distance.

His most beloved woman was standing alone in the porch. Her face had its usual leisurely elegance, and her eyes were fixed on the centre of a nearby lake. It felt like murky darkness at the bottom of the lake would be clarified, having its mysteries unveiled with her wisdom.

Changxiao yelled, "Mother! Mother!" He ran and pounced forwards.

Pingting heard her son's voice and shifted her gaze away from the centre of the lake. She turned and pursed her lips in a smile, bending down to hug her son. Chu Beijie walked over, holding her around the waist. "What are you thinking, standing here so thoughtfully?"

Changxiao was hugged by Pingting for a bit before thrashing around, wanting to play on the ground. Pingting bent down and let him free, patting his head. "Be a bit careful. Don't play with the knife-knife." She then straightened to answer Chu Beijie's question, "I'm thinking about the Queen's Crown."

Chu Beijie was very curious, "Why would you ever want such a tacky thing?"

Pingting shook her head, "Not mine, but Yaotian's."

Chu Beijie knew she was still upset over He Xia. His arms tightened, letting her comfortably lean in his chest. He slowed his voice down, "Why are you thinking about Yaotian's Queen Crown?"

Pingting was silent for a long time, frowning deep in thought before saying, "Do you still remember our past?"

Chu Beijie thought for a bit, smiling, "I remember every single thing about our past. Why don't you let me listen to the ones you're referring to?"

Pingting closed her eyes and thought for a moment. Her delicate lips moved slightly, listing, "The five year truce in the valley, the death of the two Princes of Dong Lin, Pingting's hunger strike. It's just a rough number, but we actually had

three opportunities.”

Chu Beijie was baffled, “Opportunities for what?”

Pingting raised her head to look at Chu Beijie, her bright eyes flashing as she replied, “If you had been heartless, not giving any mercy to Pingting, in these three opportunities, we would’ve been like He Xia and Princess Yaotian.”

Chu Beijie laughed, “I’m not He Xia, nor are you Princess Yaotian.”

Pingting gave him a profound look, sighing sadly. “True. That’s why I’m not Princess Yaotian, and you are not He Xia.”

This sigh seemed to take away all of the sadness of life and death. She remained in Chu Beijie’s arms, only feeling incredibly warm and comfortable.

The clever me, the stupid me, the kind me, the evil me...are they all the me you love?

Pingting stayed in Chu Beijie’s warm embrace, revealing a sweet smile.

The sun set in the west, and the moon came out.

We once swore to the moon, to never turn against each other.

This kind of love, one that wouldn’t turn against each other, was perhaps something mortals could not shatter.

A Lonesome Fragrance Waiting to be Appreciated – Volume 3 Chapter 75

Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Vol03 Ch75: Special (end)

—Confusion over beauty can be either sexual and aromantic. Sexual and aromantic are very different, and should not be said in the same sentence.

All the trades gradually flourished.

There was peace, and the world was in its golden age. The chaos among the four countries was recalled as an incredible loss of life. If the Emperor of today, the formerly famous general Chu Beijie, had not decide to come down the mountains and put an end to the chaos by uniting the world, who knew how many more years people would be able to see such bustling towns on this way?

A slender hand opened the curtain of the carriage, letting the sounds and sights of the lively outdoors flood inside. There were sounds of sales, laughter, and the bartering sounds of young wives buying food. It was constantly noisy.

A pair of beautifully bright eyes flashed, glancing at the world outside before reservedly escaping back into the darkness.

The carriage was exquisite and refined, complete with gold and silver. Even the horses' bridles were built from silver. There were a total of eighteen guards riding horses in the front and rear, quietly trotting across this flourishing area.

A boy and girl sat in the carriage, neither of them ordinary nobles. The girl was a bit older, having a delicate face like a plum blossom. Her lips were red enough without lipstick. She had a rare noble air about her which stunned everyone.

She was the Princess of the Weihao House from far away. Her name was Yin Luo, renowned as the most

beautiful child amongst the House. Because of her intelligence, she was the Chief of the House's favourite.

The other person was her elder brother, Yin Yi. The two siblings had come far away from home, bringing a large number of treasures to reach this strange land for something very important towards the Weihao House's future.

"What is Sister thinking?" Yin Yi asked.

Yin Luo pondered for quite a long time, replying, "I'm wondering what the Emperor of the Ting country looks

Like. His stories have been spread in the world for many years, so he must be an old man now."

Yin Yi chuckled in spite of himself. "How did Sis come to such a conclusion? This Emperor was a famous general since young. He led the army to guard Dong Lin country at the age of fifteen, going through numerous battles. His enemies would shudder at the faintest scent of him. After that, for some reason he disappeared to live in seclusion in the mountains, refusing to appear in the world again. Only after all of the generals and the four countries were ruined by chaos did he finally come out of the mountains to settle everything, establishing the Ting country. The Ting army has only been established for six years, and when you add them all up, he's only a little older than thirty, the peak state of men."

Yin Luo didn't know whether to believe her brother's words. She quietly lifted a corner of the curtain, peeped outside and suddenly said, "The Ting army."

"What's wrong?"

"The Ting army."

Yin Yi's face was full of surprise. He shouted the driver to a stop. He shuffled beside Yin Luo, asking, "What's wrong?" He then followed Yin Luo's gaze outside.

There was a three-storey high restaurant on the side of the street. A large flag rested against the pillar of the open lobby. The banner had the words, "The incidents of the past described and exchanged with passerbys." A man who appeared to be a storyteller was shaking his head as he sat outside, surrounded by a large circle of people eager to watch what was going on. It appeared the

restaurant happened to be open that day, and the owner had set up their lobby to attract customers to the storyteller, making him a bit more popular than usual.

“Move the carriage aside for us to get a bit closer.”

“Sis...”

“It’ll do no harm. We’ve plenty of time.” Yin Luo pursed her lips and smiled at her brother.

When Yin Yi saw his younger sister’s sweet smile, he didn’t want to disappoint her, so he ordered the guards following them to stop and wait for a bit. When the carriage was a bit closer to the entrance of the restaurant, he ordered the driver to reward the owner of the restaurant with some money and alcohol. He asked the storyteller to speak a bit louder, so that the people inside the carriage could hear.

The storyteller was currently at an exciting part.

“When the Emperor of today read the description of the letters about the chaos in the four countries, although his eyebrows were furrowed for a long time, he refused to change his original plan. He told his subordinates, ‘I already don’t care about these things. No matter what you say, it’s useless. There are too many suitable heroes under the skies to settle the four countries. There’s no point in me being the one to do it.’ From his words, it seemed that there was no way he agreed to go out of the mountains.”

At these words, all of the anticipated looks in his audience changed. They sighed loudly and someone yelled, “Why didn’t our Emperor come out of the mountains? The world was already such a mess then.”

“What are you panicking about? If the Emperor hadn’t agreed to come out of the mountains, where would we get our peace today?” The storyteller laughed a bit and drank some tea to refresh his throat. His expression completely changed, “When his subordinates heard this, they immediately panicked, ‘Why is Duke still not doing anything at such a time?’ Heh, this panic caused his subordinate to think an extremely clever plan. He told our Emperor, ‘Although there are many heroes under the skies, you are the only one who can save Miss Bai. Miss Bai is currently in danger, and if you don’t go, our future Empress may not be able to

hold out.’ When the Emperor heard this, his expression changed. His eyes widened, roaring, ‘Who dares to harm my Emperess? I shall kill him!’

The storyteller angrily glared, vividly and deeply touching the audience’s heart, but an unfathomably good-natured laughter chose this pause to ring out. “Your lies don’t add up in your storytelling. The Ting country was still non-existent then. How could that subordinate possibly know Miss Bai would be the Empress in the future?”

“Huh, it’s not like no one thinks you’re intelligent if you just stay quiet. Those words of yours are just like a drain.” The storyteller became serious, “Speaking of Miss Bai, her history is extraordinary. She grew up in the Jing-An Ducal Residence of Gui Le, able to sing and appreciate dance since young. Forget her renowned qin, she was gifted in men’s tasks of study and war. A fortune teller says she is a goddess descended from the skies, to assist the master of the mortal world beneath. After the King of Gui Le knew this, he sent orders to marry her, not expecting that when Miss Bai saw the King of Gui Le, she said, ‘You’re not qualified to marry me, I will only marry the real master of the mortal world. After that, she chose our Emperor as expected. Ah, can’t you see how great her judgement is?”

Yin Yi was sitting in the carriage, chuckling, “What a load of rubbish. When put like that, that woman is practically invincible in everything, rather like a monster.”

Another person respectfully replied, “Mister, you said our Empress is a goddess descended from the skies, so she must be an utter beauty right?”

“Of course, her beauty is ethereal.” The storyteller’s face was full of admiration and praise, “She really is the finest colour in this world, one that no one can rival. Her face is as delicate as a flower, her voice like an oriole. Back then our Emperor had seen hundreds of fields of such flowers, but when he saw the Empress, he forgot all of these beautiful women at first sight, only having the Empress left in his eyes.

“Isn’t that wrong?” An old man began to squint, rather suspicious, “I heard back then our Empress and Emperor fought against each other in Bei Mo country, at least that’s what that Storyteller Zhang or something said.” It

appeared others heard the same thing and all nodded.

“Lies!” The storyteller grimaced, “The Emperor and the Empress are a loving couple. How could they face each other on the battlefield? Don’t listen to that Zhang’s nonsense.”

The debate was rampant, but the curtain slowly lowered.

“Nothing particularly important, let’s go.”

The horse began to step slowly.

Not long later, the carriage moved out of this tiny town. In the distance, there was a newly paved road. The sides of it were lined with delightfully green grass, and there seemed to be no end in sight.

Yin Yi quietly studied his sister. They travelled for a long time before he opened his mouth to say, “Don’t listen to that storyteller’s rubbish. There aren’t any goddesses. No matter how the Empress is as beautiful as a flower, she won’t be as beautiful as Sis. Even if she is more beautiful than Sis, how could she still be since more years have passed for her? When Sis enters the Palace, I’m sure the Emperor’s heart will be tied to Sis.”

Yin Luo’s gaze turned towards Yin Yi, coldly sweeping across his face. Yin Yi was still thinking he had said the right thing until he noticed her cold gaze appeared to be piercing right through his body. He could only shut up.

“The Ting army is too strong. The Ting country has strong horses and men to unite the four countries. Although my Weihao House is far away, we are also vaguely threatened. Father is correct. Arranged marriage is perhaps the only way to protect my House’s future.” Yin Luo sighed softly, wryly smiling, “Yin Luo is just afraid that the Emperor may not be able to be trapped by beauty. If it’s like that, then Yin Luo’s trip would be wasted.” She suddenly appeared to have suddenly thought of something. She frowned as she mumbled, “Ting country, Ting country? ...That Empress’ nickname, isn’t it Pingting?”

Yin Yi’s heart was uneasy at this. He forced a smile as he comforted, “Please don’t sell yourself short, Sis. I still think there’s no man under the skies who can ignore Sis’s beauty. The Emperor is a man too, and the Empress must be nearing thirty. They should be tired of each other, being married for so long, so it’s about

time to find new love. As long as Sis puts her beauty into good use, there's no need to be afraid..."

"No need to say any more, Brother." Yin Luo turned away, "We'll know what to do when we meet this inscrutable goddess of an Emperor. I have plans of my own."

In the humid air, there was the damp thuds of hooves.

Outside the window, the wilderness was boundless. Their destination of the trip, the capital of Ting country, should be at the end.

The Weihao House was a renowned family in the far distance. The House's men were martial, puissant, with fine skills in combat while the women were beautiful, slender and gentle. They had both heroes and beauties. Because of the House's established nobility status, they were rarely attacked by others and hence not afraid of outsiders, allowing them to accumulate treasures over many generations.

If it hadn't been for the Ting country's immense power or that their Emperor, so wise despite his young age, was one that even caused the elderly Chief of the House to fear, the Weihao House would have never sent their unprecedented beauty and treasures.

During dusk the next day, the party transporting the treasures and the beauty finally, after a long journey, reached the capital of the Ting country.

The one responsible for greeting them was the Emperor's most trusted Tiger General, Moran. Moran was on his horse at the very front, leading the party to a majestic residence. He got off his horse and walked to the side of the carriage, raising his voice, "Please disembark, Princess. The Emperor has ordered me to welcome Princess to follow me into the residence, to see the Empress."

Inside the carriage, Yin Luo and Yin Yi stiffened at their words, their eyes meeting each other's helplessly.

Yin Yi was curious, "We have come from afar and still have our House's flag up. Why is it the Emperor not seeing us first but the Queen? And why the sudden display of authority when we have only just arrived?" His face was rather annoyed.

“What need is there for Yin Luo to be afraid of, having only an authoritative wife in the entire residence?” Yin Luo faintly smiled, her radiance escaping into her surroundings.

Yin Yi’s confidence rose considerably. “Nice, Sis, that’s the way you should be. Don’t ruin our Weihao House’s first Princess’ fame.” He got up and helped Yin Luo down the carriage, as she was wearing Weihao’s heaviest clothing.

Moran hurriedly stopped him. “The Queen only wishes to see the Princess. This way please, Prince.”

Yin Yi gave a look of dissatisfaction at Moran and was about to protest when Yin Luo softly assured, “Don’t worry, Brother. I will have to go alone into this residence one day, sooner or later.”

“Remember, no one beats your beauty. No one is more qualified than you to get the Emperor’s favour.” Yin Yi tightly held onto her hand, whispering.

Yin Luo studied him for a moment, nodding, “Yin Luo will remember that.”

After successive quiet steps, she followed after the beckoner, each step taking her deeper into the residence.

Yin Yi waited for a whole three days in the guesthouse specifically to attend important guests of other noble families. He hadn’t received any news from Yin Luo in the last three days. How was she? Had she gotten the Emperor’s favour? Had she overcome the Empress’ power?

Not a word of news had been received!

The Emperor had solemnly summoned him, receiving the Chief of the Weihao House’s letters and gifts as well as returning many gifts of his own.

The monarch whose power was beyond measure was very young and handsome, not like a man of thirty at all.

Yin Yi spoke on behalf of his father, expressing the House of Weihao’s desires and intention to peacefully interact.

The Emperor smiled proudly, “The peasants have had enough of chaos caused by war, so I won’t use soldiers for no reason.” He then added, “The Empress doesn’t like war either.” At the mention of his Empress, his handsome face had a

passing hint of gentleness, one that could not be concealed at all.

Yin Yi was secretly alarmed by this and took opportunity of the moment to ask about her sister who was summoned away by the Empress.

“The Princess?” The Emperor said, “Oh well, the Queen feels a bit bored in the Palace, so lets the Princess accompany her for a bit before making further decisions.”

To this inscrutable Emperor, Yin Yi couldn’t ask any more after that.

That day, the Emperor was in a good mood as he talked. He talked about the world’s trends, military power, country borders, and commercial trades. He even went on to talk about this year’s complete harvest of rice and how the homes of the officials in the courts were doing. He started small but then big, even casually issuing several imperial decrees on the way before turning and smiling at Yin Yi, “What does Prince think of this?”

Ze Yin took a step back, his head bowed.

He finally understood why this man would always make his enemy tremble in fear. He had such strong courage and sharp eyes that could see right through people’s minds, completely capable of destroying invisible enemies.

After dismissing himself to the Emperor, he left the grand hall. Yin Yi sighed at the guards leading the way out, “The Ting country has such a wise monarch. I reckon no one in this world is able to guess the monarch’s mind.”

The guard laughed at these words, turning back, “Prince, you’re wrong. There’s someone who can guess the Emperor’s mind with one hundred percent accuracy.”

“Oh?”

The guard put up a single finger, mysteriously pointing in the distance. As for what he was pointing at, it was the Queen’s residence tucked deep inside the Palace.

“The...the Queen?”

A strange kind of uneasy feeling began to slowly rise from the bottom of his

spine.

In the last three days, this uneasy feeling hadn't left once. Yin Luo, his most beloved younger sister, was currently revealing the first Princess of the Weihao House to what kind of woman? Would she cause their House to be hated? Would she emerge the winner of this new battle in the palace?

He suddenly remembered when the Emperor mentioned Yin Luo, he referred to her as "the Princess", not directly calling her name. Could it be that the Emperor didn't even meet Yin Luo yet?

Yin Yi paced back and forth in the guesthouse as if a beast trapped in a prison.

Their peaceful intentions had already been conveyed, therefore their purpose was achieved. But he couldn't bear abandoning Yin Luo to the depths of the Palace. If Yin Luo wasn't able to find happiness, she would have a miserable fate.

People were people. They were always too eager to achieve their goals and only regretted when the price had been paid.

"How is Princess Yin Luo's situation?"

"I want to see the Emperor."

"I want to see the Queen."

"None of them are okay? Fine, I want to see Tiger General who led my sister into the Palace back then!"

He had wanted to pull out his sword and fight his way out several times, as if Yin Luo had already been murdered by that evil wife in the depths of the residence. He absolutely detested himself and found it strange how he had sent his sister from thousands of miles away to this strange place, without a single complaint, to fight an impossible battle.

His words of comfort to Yin Luo were all lies, all a load of nonsense!

He was just a jerk who exchanged his sister for a peaceful life.

The moment before Yin Yi was about to go crazy, Yin Luo returned.

She had already changed into the Ting country's clothing for noble women. Her clean white silk clothing complimented her cascading black hair, making her

look particularly distinguished. When she entered the room, she looked at her brother for a long time, before lowering down her head. She pursed her lips and began to chuckle. She chuckled for quite a long time before raising her head again, looking at Yin Yi's helplessly surprised and delighted expression.

"I saw the Empress." She only spoke a few words after a long time.

"What on earth does she look like? I don't believe that she's more beautiful than you. Sis, she didn't use her Authority as Empress to bully you, did she?"

Yin Luo thought for a long time before murmuring, "Should not be said in the same sentence..."

"What?"

"I said..." Yin Luo had the expression of recollection. Her gaze drifted to the distant palace bathed in sunlight, "Should not be said in the same sentence." She abruptly turned back, giving Yin Yi a dazzling smile, "Brother, let's go home. The Queen said I can choose to stay in the Palace or go home. No matter what I choose, my mission has been fulfilled, and so the current and future generations of the Ting country and the House of Weihao will be allies."

She looked at Yin Yi's expression of disbelief, and then, like a freed phoenix, she delightedly spun in a circle.

"Brother, let's go home." The brilliant light of youth flashed in her dark eyes.

Confusion over beauty can either be sexual and aromatic.

Sexual and aromatic are very different.

Therefore, they should not be said in the same sentence.

In a single country, there was no need to insert the finest colour of another Duchess, when there was already the finest aroma of the Empress.

Go home, the first Princess of the Weihao House. Although you may have planned to gain the favour of the Emperor, you are fated to be forgotten in the long run.

That is not your destiny.

Go home, young and beautiful girl.

You have not experienced those angry horses, bloodied clothes, days of military confrontation, the brilliant sound of guqin, the terrible oppressive feeling of despair, the endless resentment, the courage that could swallow the world, the feeling of wild, fierce love that not even a hundred thousand storytellers could fully portray.

Go home. Your bell-like laughter should be echoed in your happy home, echoed in the ears of your loving parents.

Late at night, deep inside the Palace, a pair of wise eyes silently stared at the bright moon in the sky.

A palace maid quietly came in from outside, bowing as she reported, "Madam, that Princess has departed, leaving the capital tonight."

Pingting looked up. She was leaning comfortably on a soft pillow.

"Where is General Moran?" She suddenly asked.

"I don't know."

"Is he in his official residence?"

"I heard he hasn't returned."

"Is he accompanying the Emperor in dealing governmental affairs?"

"From the manservants beside the Emperor, I heard the Emperor talked to the two Senior Officials, but General wasn't there."

Pingting was lost in thought for a few moments, sadly saying, "Then he must be chasing. I don't know whether he's alone or has taken a thousand or so men."

The palace maid looked at her in puzzlement. This woman who created this world suddenly snorted in laughter, chortling like a child. She clapped softly, "I bet he definitely can't stand it. That dear Moran, dignified Tiger General, had his soul entirely caught by the young Princess in just three days. Oh well, you ought to try the taste of love as well."

The palace maid said, "You go see the Emperor. Ask the Emperor to hurry and make arrangements to take over the responsibilities of the Tiger General, so when he is found missing, no one will be too confused."

Chu Beijie happened to return at this moment. He asked while stepping into the room, “Who is missing?”

Pingting smiled as she recounted everything again before continuing, “You haven’t seen how Moran found all sorts of excuses to visit me. From new tributes required to be looked over by the Empress to a celebration coming up soon in the Palace, and all sorts of programs that the Empress had to look over in advance. Aren’t they all excuses to see the Princess? But I reckon that Princess is too intelligent and won’t be so easy to obtain. Moran has a lot of hardship ahead.”

Chu Beijie burst into laughter, “Can he suffer more hardships than me?” He dismissed the palace maids with a wave, hugging Pingting and carrying her to the bed.

Pingting reddened at his sight. “You...are already a dignified Emperor. You ought to behave yourself a bit more.” She turned away, which was a perfect gap for Chu Beijie to take the phoenix hairpin, allowing her hair to spill all over the bed.

Chu Beijie slowly came closer, smelling the aroma around her neck. He whispered, “Does Empress still remember the song she sung for me back then?”

“I don’t.” Pingting rolled her energetic eyes, a little bit angry, “I just remember that a certain someone smashed my qin, locked me in a small cottage in a secluded residence, and abused me hundreds of times.”

“I admit that was my fault.” Chu Beijie quickly surrendered before softening his voice again, “It’s been such a long time. Don’t tell me Empress plans to spend all the time on recalling our long story of the past?”

Pingting pursed her lips and chuckled sheepishly. She sighed, a bit sadly. “True, it’s a long story, one that not even an entire lifetime will completely recall. So long, so long...”

Back when she had been with Chu Beijie in the secluded country, chaos had yet to fall on the four countries.

If it hadn’t been for the greed of human hearts to desire to succeed, to dominate all power and poison the people of the world, how would such a

strong Ting country be established, as well as this imperial couple?

So, like this, this long and arduous story was like the one song Pingting played, creating life with her five fingers.

The moon hung in the sky, gently casting its light down above these two people, who were above ten million.

Do you still remember we once swore to the moon, to never turn against each other?

Perhaps we have never truly once turned against each other.

Translation Notes:

- “Confusion over beauty can be sexual and aromantic...”: Google says this is an adaptation from Lu Pu-Wei’s biography, which details about sex culture in Ancient China. There are a few puns/references to this saying in the chapter which is really hard to explain. The character for “colour” typically refers to sexual/physical, “aroma” refers to aromantic/mental. Therefore, when the storyteller uses the term “finest colour” to describe Pingting, it’s hinting her sexual beauty. But obviously, she isn’t...Yin Luo was able to tell Pingting was actually the “finest arom”.
- “Tiger General”: Usually referring to the best five military generals serving under a ruler, but this was not an actual term in history. Well, it appears Moran is the only one with this title.

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TooLate

From doswap

